

Opportunities for Meaningful Participation in School

Meaningful participation at school—an important component of school climate targeted for improvement by California's Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Program—represents the involvement of the student in relevant, engaging, and interesting activities with opportunities for responsibility and contribution. Student interest, engagement, and motivation are fostered by providing students with opportunities to participate in meaningful, personally relevant, activities in school (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979).¹ Opportunities for participation and contribution are one of the three key environmental protective factors, along with caring relationships and clear and consistent high expectations messages, that support student success (Benard, 2004).

We use data from the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys (Cal-SCHLS) to describe how student well-being differs across California high schools with different levels of meaningful participation opportunities. Measured at the school-level, we describe how school opportunities for meaningful participation are related to the well-being and academic performance of students within schools.

WHY ARE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT?

Autonomy-supportive learning environments—environments that provide opportunities for students to engage in relevant and interesting activities that involve respon-

sibility and contribution—help foster motivation and promote identification with the goals of learning (Black & Deci, 2000). When students are given responsibility and some control over the learning process, they are more likely to take ownership of educational goals and become invested in academic and other types of success (Newman, 1992). Moreover, meaningful participation in the classroom allows students to actively contribute positively to the classroom climate and likely enhances student bonding to school (National Research Council, 2003; McLaughlin, 2000).

There are several ways that opportunities for meaningful participation are thought to promote student engagement, school bonding, and overall well-being. Self-determination theory holds that students who have more control over instructional activities are more likely to connect learning to personal goals, interests, and values (Black & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Such students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to learn and to internalize academic values (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). Intrinsic motivation to learn in school and internalization of academic values have been linked to school effort, academic self-efficacy, and school performance (Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002; Miserandino, 1996; National Research Council, 2003; Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, & Fulmore, 1994). In contrast, students who do not feel a sense of autonomy are more likely to be disaffected by school (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

Connecting students to meaningful, cooperative, group activities can also help students fulfill their psychological needs for belonging and help facilitate social and problem-solving skills (Benard, 2004). Participation in such activities is associated with a range of benefits, including

¹ For a description of school practices aimed at providing students with opportunities for meaningful participation see O'Malley and Amarillas' (2011) California S3 What Works Brief entitled "Opportunities for Meaningful Participation," retrievable from: <http://californias3.wested.org/tools/3>

increased self-efficacy, mastery orientation, self-control, optimism, and civic engagement (Billig, 2000; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1992). Opportunities for participation also allow students to contribute positively to the school community. Such contributions help youth define their identities as productive contributors to the school setting (Benard, 2004).

Identifying and supporting meaningful opportunities requires teachers and other school adults to know their students in order to connect them to personally relevant activities, both within the academic curricula as well as beyond the typical scope of classroom learning. Thoughtful teachers create meaningful day-to-day classroom activities via pedagogical practices that support student autonomy, including: listening carefully to understand students' perspectives and understandings; providing numerous opportunities for choice within the school day; providing opportunities for students to ask questions, engage in dialogue, and present learned information; providing and encouraging the use of an array of hands-on learning materials; and offering consistent support and encouragement along the way toward mastery (Bozack, Vega, McCaslin, & Good, 2008). Thoughtfully integrated opportunities for field- and project-based learning and performance-based assessments further enhance the sense of meaning and purpose of classroom activities (Benard & Slade, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

To complement classroom learning, school adults cultivate opportunities whereby students make meaningful contributions to the physical and social milieu of the school. Service learning projects, for example, provide one avenue through which students are able to collaborate toward solutions to real-life problems (www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/sl/overview.asp#whatissl). The sense of meaning created by Student Action Teams, a type of service learning program, has been found to be positively related to school connectedness, perception of positive peer relationships, and self-esteem (Holdsworth, Cahill, & Smith, 2003).

SAMPLE AND MEASURES

The study sample consists of all 793 public high schools that administered the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) during the 2008/09–2009/10 period in California. In addition to the CHKS, we used data from the 2010 Base Academic Performance Index (API) file released by CDE to obtain school-level academic performance information.

We constructed a school-level measure of opportunities for meaningful participation using a three-item scale. The items comprising the scale ask students whether, at school, they: (a) do interesting activities, (b) help decide things like class activities or rules, (c) do things that make a difference. Response choices ranged from “not at all true” (1) to “very much true” (4). A statistical model (confirmatory factor analysis) was used to estimate scores for each student. School-level averages of student scores were then calculated for each high school with CHKS data, and the scores of schools were ranked to determine the distribution of scores across comprehensive high schools in the state.²

Student well-being was measured by the following CHKS items:

- » **STUDENT GRADES**—a dichotomous variable indicating that the student reported receiving grades of mostly Bs or higher during the 12 months prior to the survey
- » **SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS (HIGH)**—a dichotomous variable signifying that students reported “high” levels (> 3.75) on the 5-item school connectedness scale. The school connectedness scale has a maximum potential range of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and is based on the following items: (a) I feel close to people at this school, (b) I am happy to be at this school, (c) I feel like I am a part of this school, (d) the teachers at this school treat students fairly, and (e) I feel safe in my school.

2 The measure of opportunities for meaningful participation used is identical to that reported on the School Climate Report Card developed for California's Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Program. School Climate Report Cards for S3 schools are available from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/CSRC/searchname.aspx>

- » **TRUANCY**—a dichotomous variable indicating that the student reported skipping school or cutting classes one or more times during the 12 months prior to the survey.
- » **LOW SCHOOL SAFETY**—an indicator variable representing that the student reported feeling “unsafe” or “very unsafe” at school.

To assess school-level academic performance, we relied on California’s 2010 Base Academic Performance Index (API) scores. The API, the cornerstone of the state’s accountability system, is a weighted index based on a school’s student subject-specific scores on California standards-based tests and other indicators.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND STUDENT WELL-BEING

Figures 1 and 2 show that students’ reports of school grades, school connectedness, truancy, and school safety vary considerably across schools with different levels of opportunities for meaningful participation.

- » **SCHOOL GRADES.** Schools with high scores on the school climate measure of meaningful participation had larger percentages of students who reported receiving high grades than schools with low scores. Among schools in the lowest quartile of meaningful participation, 52% of 9th graders reported receiving mostly B’s or above, compared to 74% of students in the highest quartile in the state. The same pattern was evident for 11th grade students.
- » **SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS.** Opportunities for meaningful participation is positively related to school connectedness. One-third of 9th and 11th graders in schools in the lowest quartile of meaningful participation exhibited high levels of school connectedness compared to 58% of 9th graders and 56% of 11th graders in the highest quartile schools.
- » **TRUANCY.** Students in schools with low scores on meaningful participation had larger percentages of students who reported skipping school. Forty-one percent of 9th graders and 54% of 11th graders reported skipping school in lowest quartile schools, compared to 25%

of 9th graders and 41% of 11th graders in the highest quartile schools.

- » **LOW SCHOOL SAFETY.** Opportunities for meaningful participation are also strongly associated with student perceptions of school safety. Among 9th graders, 54% of students in schools in the lowest quartile schools reported feeling unsafe at school. Forty-two percent of 9th graders reported feeling unsafe in the highest quartile schools. Among 11th graders, the percentage of students who reported feeling unsafe was 61% and 42% in the lowest and highest quartile schools, respectively.

Overall, California high schools exhibiting high levels of opportunities for meaningful participation have more students that report receiving higher grades and being strongly connected to school, and fewer students that report skipping school and feeling unsafe at school.

Figure 1. Ninth grader well-being by opportunities for meaningful participation (school quartile)

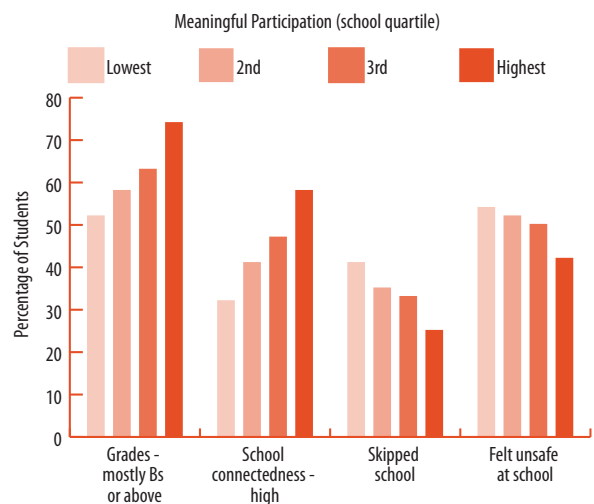
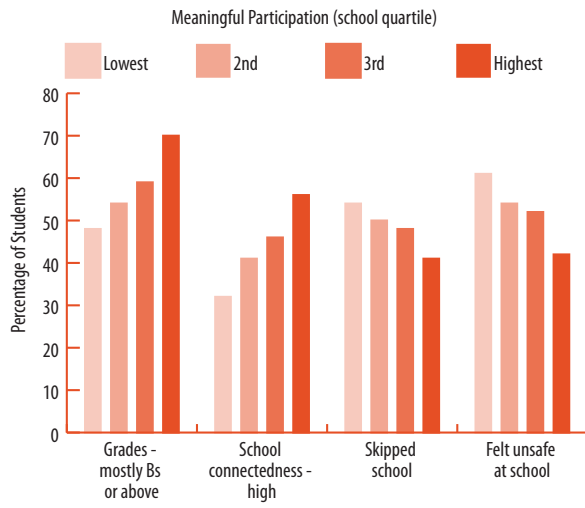


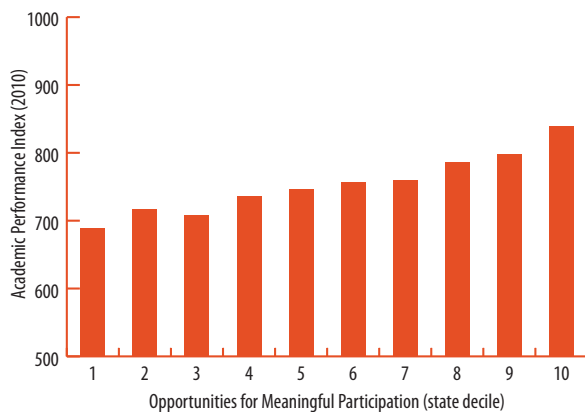
Figure 2. Eleventh grader well-being by opportunities for meaningful participation (school quartile)



MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND SCHOOL-LEVEL ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Figure 3 shows how school API scores vary across schools with different levels of meaningful participation. In general, the higher the level of meaningful participation, the higher the school API score. High schools in the lowest decile on meaningful participation exhibit the lowest API scores—averaging 688. High schools in deciles 2 and 3 average 712 on the API, with no noticeable differences across the two decile groups. Thereafter, average API scores increase in a stepwise manner for each succeeding decile, rising to 839 for the highest decile.

Figure 3. Academic Performance Index by opportunities for meaningful participation (state decile)



SUMMARY

California high schools that provide numerous opportunities for students to engage in relevant, engaging, and interesting activities that involve responsibility and contribution—as indicated by student perceptions—have more students who report receiving higher grades and being strongly connected to school, and fewer students who report skipping school and feeling unsafe at school. These California high schools also exhibit substantially higher API scores than other schools. The results suggest that opportunities for meaningful participation are an important part of school climate that is strongly related to student performance, student connectedness to school, and student perceptions of school safety. These results are consistent with previous research suggesting autonomy-supporting schools that provide students with opportunities to contribute positively to their schools and communities and to engage in interesting, personally relevant instructional activities hold promise for improving the conditions for student learning and academic achievement.

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