

Disconnect on Student Engagement

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In the June 5, 2014 edition of the Diplomas Count special edition of *Education Week*, the official forum of the education establishment, Sarah Sparks' "[An Age-Old Problem Gets New Attention](#)," reveals the establishment disconnect on the imperative of attaining high levels of student engagement with high value instruction. It is an age-old problem because widespread disengagement is widely misperceived as a problem of under-motivated students and inadequately trained teachers. So, it is implicitly assumed that one size can fit all. Supposedly, it will just take improved teacher training, including strategies to motivate the disengaged, to succeed at teaching the same things in the same way to everyone that happens to be assigned to a particular classroom. We know that students have different learning styles, and that the [subject themes that matter](#) in holding students' attention and creating a passion for learning difficult academic concepts differ, especially in our increasingly distraction-laden environments. The current system's commitment to comprehensive uniformity, rather than a dynamic menu of schooling choices as diverse as the abilities and interests of our children, does not widely register as a key source of student disengagement.

Though obvious, systemic reasons to fail at achieving widespread engagement in academics do surface periodically, even in *Education Week* (for example, *Education Week* founder Ronald Wolk's citing of [out-of-field teaching statistics](#)), there must be massive denial or brain Teflon on the issues I cited in [Roots of the Problem](#) and in my discussion of unnecessarily dauntingly [challenging teaching circumstances](#). Those blogs point out that our K-12 system heroically assumes that we can sort children by age and neighborhood (fail to [ability group by subject](#)), use [weak and boring politically correct textbooks and curricula](#), and staff large numbers of classrooms with [teachers with no training in the subjects being taught](#) (coaches teaching math, etc.), and still expect virtually all of the children to

be riveted by the instruction being delivered. If that were possible, widespread disengagement would not be an Age-Old problem.

Sadly, the disconnect – the [denial of a systemic core basis](#) for the age-old engagement challenge – even exists within key organizations pursuing transformational change in K-12 our school system. The title of the *Education Week* article (“Age-Old Problem”) should be enough of an unwitting Freudian slip to reveal that the mainstream ‘thinking’ on this issue needs some re-thinking.