

Q&A with Russell Quaglia, expert on student engagement

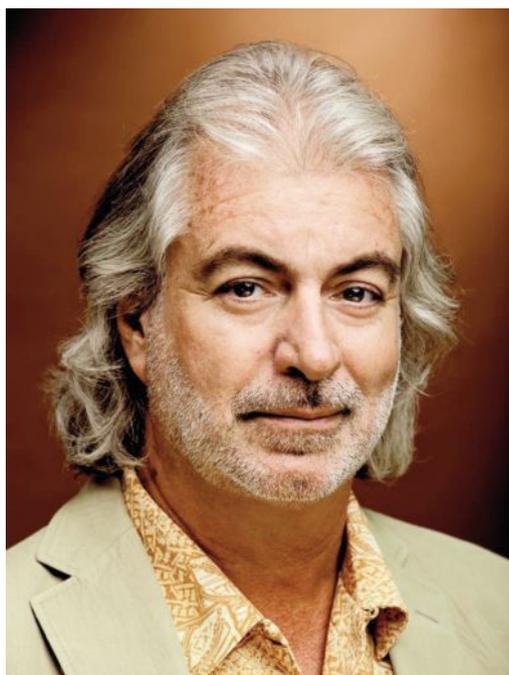
Our cover package this month is on disconnected youth—young men and women who are not in school, not employed, and have no involvement with their community. School disengagement is a large part of the problem—and perhaps the most easy to remedy. But how to do this? Russell Quaglia may have some answers. He is the president and founder of the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and putting into practice the conditions that foster student aspirations in schools and learning communities around the world.

Senior Editor Lawrence Hardy spoke with Quaglia about what students need, why fun leads to better test scores, and how school board members can listen to and learn from their students.

According to your latest poll, less than half of the students surveyed agreed that “I am a valued member of my school community.” Why is this percentage so low?

Feeling valued as a member of the school community means believing that people genuinely care about who you are as an individual. The percentage is low because teachers do not show students that they care about them in ways that are perceptible to students. While it sounds too basic to be true, we see it time and time again in schools: Of course teachers care—they just need to overtly transfer this understanding to students. Teachers need to know students’ names, and their hopes and dreams, and they need to show connec-

tions between their lives and the curriculum. Teachers need to care if students are absent from school—and ask how they are doing when they return. Teachers need to have high expectations for all students’ success—and help students develop a concrete plan for achieving their dreams. Our



research has found that students who feel they are valued members of the school community are five times more likely to be academically motivated to learn than students who do not.

How can we change the disconnect between the intention to create a welcoming environment and what students actually experience?

Albeit well-intended, schools make too many assumptions. They assume that if they create an engaging learning environment, offer a multitude of co-curric-

ular activities, and use advanced technological tools, students will feel welcome. However, without the crucial foundation of caring, this misses the mark. A welcoming environment for students is a place where their hopes and dreams are known, understood, and supported. It is impossible for students to feel school is welcoming when they don’t feel valued for who they are.

If you could change one thing to improve the experience for students, what would it be?

I would recommend that every student have an individualized learning plan, and that the students help develop the plan and remain involved in tracking their progress. When teachers and students collaborate, learning is personalized. Not only does this ensure that all students know they are appreciated as individuals, but an individualized learning plan allows schools to concentrate on student aspirations as much as they do on test scores.

Are the qualities of fun, creativity, and excitement compatible with the need to raise test scores?

They are more than compatible—they can directly address the issue. The problem is that when schools become so concerned about raising test scores, they forget about the factors that motivate students to learn. They focus on teaching content, content, content, and forget they are working with whole people, not just their minds as machines. Students need to: feel like they belong, have a hero in their lives they can learn from, experience a sense of accomplishment, have fun in the

NSBA ROUNDUP

Supreme Court rules in employment case and cites NSBA's brief

The U.S. Supreme Court has favorably cited NSBA's amicus brief in support of an important ruling that protects employers from lawsuits stemming from unwarranted claims of retaliation.

The June 24 ruling in *University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center v. Nassar* overrules a judgment by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit that created a higher standard for employers defending against unsupported claims of retaliation.

Writing for the Court, Justice Anthony Kennedy cited NSBA's amicus brief for the proposition that it would be against the intent of federal anti-discrimination laws to place economic and reputational costs on employers who did not discriminate.

The decision is particularly relevant for school districts because they often assign or transfer employees to improve teaching and learning and to comply with federal and state mandates. Those actions can elicit lawsuits based on a perception of retaliation, NSBA noted in its brief.

In its amicus brief, NSBA argued that a ruling to change the legal standard would have a severe impact on school districts across the country and their more than 6 million employees, encouraging more lawsuits and stifling school leaders' abilities to make decisions related to employee assignments.

NSBA pleased with Obama administration's decision to delay Affordable Care Act employer mandate

NSBA applauded the federal government's decision to delay the implementation of IRS rules for the Affordable Care Act (ACA) until January 2015, based upon the "complexity of the requirements and the need for more time to implement them effectively."

On March 18, 2013, NSBA filed a comprehensive response to the IRS's proposed rules for implementing ACA to apprise the agency of the "unanticipated impact certain provisions of the proposed rule may have as public school districts

across the country wrestle with questions." These questions range from calculation of service hours to the so-called "large employer" determinations.

In its comments to the IRS, NSBA raised concerns about the challenges the proposed rules would have on school employment arrangements such as long-term versus short-term teaching substitutes with consecutive assignments, independent contractors, additional extra-curricular duty providers, re-hired retired employees, and pay for school board members.

NSBA secures time to assess school district impact of new regulations for food sold in schools

Following the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) release of its Interim Final Rule on Nutrition Standards for All Foods Sold in School, NSBA Executive Director Thomas J. Gentzel issued a statement, from which this is excerpted:

"America's school boards are deeply committed to fostering a healthy and positive learning environment for children to achieve their full potential. Most school districts have already taken meaningful steps to improve the quality of foods available from vending machines, a la carte lines, and other non-National School Lunch Program sources.

"Yet, we must acknowledge the budget and labor constraints that school districts already face in light of sequestration and the ongoing fiscal crisis for our schools, communities, and states. At a time when education is acknowledged as a priority for America's success and competitiveness, it is imperative that federal policy—including implementation of the child nutrition regulations—assures that educational systems are supported, not undermined by unfunded mandates or under-resourced requirements. School nutrition programs simply cannot be successful unless the school districts providing them have sufficient resources and local authority to administer them effectively."

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classroom, be curious and creative, have a spirit of adventure, be provided opportunities to genuinely lead with responsibility, and have confidence to take action. When students experience this, they will be invested learners who have self-worth, are meaningfully engaged, and have a sense of purpose. Positive test scores will follow.

Is it really possible to change?

Absolutely. And critical if students are going to reach their fullest potential. Some students are going to be successful in school in spite of what we do or don't do. However, the majority of students need us to make school much more user-friendly. We need to ask ourselves, "Are the students disconnected from the school environment, or is the school environment disconnected from the students?" I would argue the latter. It is the responsibility of schools to work with students to get to know them as individuals, demonstrate they are valued members of the school community, foster a sense of belonging, and support their aspirations.

What can school boards do?

The first thing school board members can do is examine their own beliefs. They must believe that students have something to teach them and recognize that students are the potential, not the problem. They need to realize that before students can achieve (academically or personally), they need to have self-worth, be meaningfully engaged in their learning, and have a sense of purpose. With these understandings in place, it's important for board members to give students a real voice in the decision-making process about how to best improve the learning environment. Offer students a seat at the table ... and listen. ■