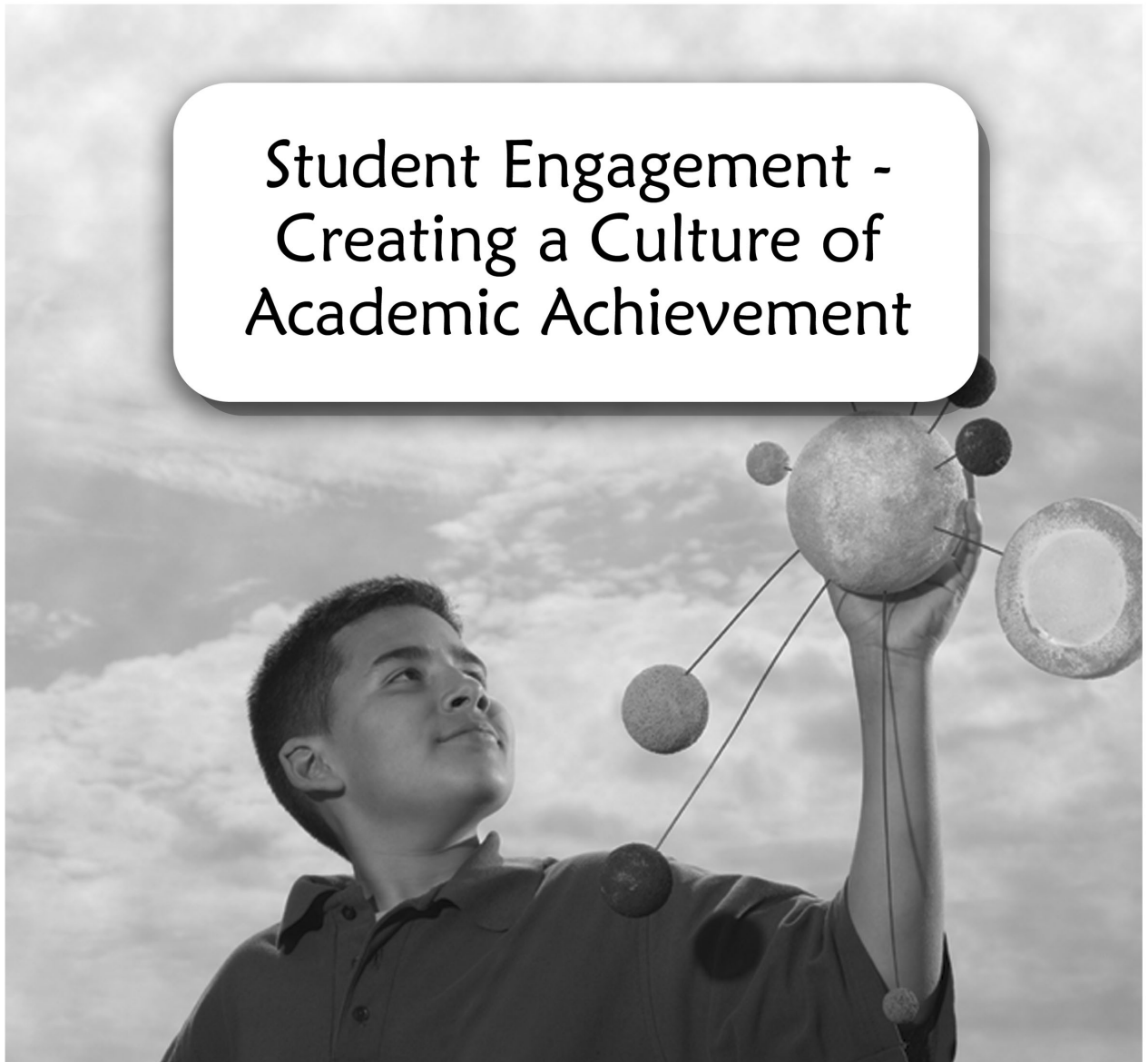


Student Engagement - Creating a Culture of Academic Achievement



**International Center for Leadership
in Education**

Acknowledgments

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Contents

Overview	v
1. Engagement — Essential for Rigor and Relevance	1
The Engaging Classroom	1
Student Engagement: Critical to the Learning Process	3
What Is Student Engagement?	4
Rigor, Relevance, and the Third “R” — Relationships	6
Application Matters	11
Hidden Lessons	12
Other Student Engagement Terms	13
Measuring Student Learning	15
Learning Criteria to Support Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships	16
Introduction to Engagement-Based Learning and Teaching	22
An Engaging School Culture	26
Summary	28
2. Student Perspective	31
The Silent Epidemic	31
My Voice	33
Other High School Surveys of Student Engagement	36
Teacher Support	40
The Environment Factor	41
Forty Assets for Student Success	43
Summary	45
3. Student Engagement — A Closer Look	47
Engagement Begins at Home	47
Starting the Engagement Process Early	50
The Three Domains of Student Engagement	51
Behavioral Signs of Student Engagement	55
Strengthening Student Engagement Behaviors	56
Disengagement	58
Motivation	64
Relationship Building	67
Combining All the Elements	70
4. Engagement-Based Learning and Teaching	73
Philosophy and Approach	73
Key Elements of EBLT	73
Laying the Foundation for Student Engagement	74
Preconditions	75

Pedagogy	79
Learning Relationships	82
Classroom Management vs. Learning-Based Relationships	86
Rewards and Incentives	90
Grading Systems as Incentives for Engagement	92
Guiding Principles	100
Habits	102
The Ethic of Working Hard	103
The Synergy of Beliefs, Emotions, and Behaviors	105
Fundamental Skills	105
Teaching and Learning in the Rigor/Relevance Framework	113
Personalizing Learning	117
Active Learning Strategies	134
Focus on Literacy	143
Creating the Ideal Classroom	157
5. Improving Engagement Through School Culture	159
Creating the Right Balance	159
Creating a New Culture	160
School Practices	164
6. Successful Engagement Practices	177
Elementary and Middle Schools	177
High Schools	204
7. Professional Development and Leadership Activities	227
Data Collection	227
Planning and Reflection	256
Leadership Activities	269
Student Activities	310
Resources	339
Core Habits of Student Achievement	339
My Voice Student Report	360
References	379



Chapter 4

Engagement-Based Learning and Teaching

Philosophy and Approach

Engagement-based learning and teaching (EBLT) is more than simply telling or encouraging students to engage themselves in their class work. EBLT forms the foundation in developing and strengthening student engagement and the overall learning process. This foundation is built through specific principles, habits, skills, and strategies.

All members of the school community can join forces to develop schoolwide practices that cultivate student engagement beliefs, values, feelings, motivation, behavioral habits, and skills that are at the crux of high levels of student engagement.

The three domains of student engagement, as described in Chapter 3, unfold in EBLT as follows:

- **Cognitive domain** consists of beliefs and values.
- **Emotional domain** consists of motivation and feelings.
- **Behavioral domain** consists of habits and skills.

In the EBLT approach, teachers and parents work systematically across all three domains to ensure an integrated and effective approach to cultivate and support student engagement at the highest level. The core habits of student achievement and other skill sets such as organizational skills and self-discipline also will be developed in the student through this approach.

Key Elements of EBLT

The EBLT approach encompasses the following six objectives.

1. **Cultivate one-on-one relationships.** The one-on-one relationship between student and teacher is the critical element that can lead to increased student motivation and higher levels of engagement in academic achievement and school life.

2. **Learn new skills and habits.** Teachers can learn new skills and habits that help them to develop, polish, and enhance their already natural inclination to motivate and engage students.
3. **Incorporate systematic strategies.** Teachers can learn systematic strategies and approaches that facilitate student engagement. Students can develop behavioral skills and habits that lead to increased academic achievement and greater involvement with school life.
4. **Take responsibility for student engagement practices.** It is primarily the teacher's responsibility to engage the students, as opposed to the teacher expecting students to come to class naturally and automatically engaged.
5. **Promote a schoolwide culture of engagement.** The best way to promote high levels of student engagement is to develop and maintain a schoolwide initiative that is dedicated to creating a culture of student engagement, involving students in school life activities, and a rigorous and relevant education for all students.
6. **Professional development is an important part of increasing student engagement.** Staff development, combined with staff ownership and recognition, will be a critical part of developing and maintaining a culture of effective student engagement.

It is easy to observe the lack of student engagement when students in the classroom are slouched in their chairs and not listening to the teacher or participating in the classroom discussion. Many teachers who constantly see disengaged students put the burden on the student and lament that they could be better teachers and have better learning results if they had the opportunity to work with a

**Laying the
Foundation for
Student
Engagement**

Classrooms with high levels of student engagement are not simply a result of “student quality.”

“better” group of students. But classrooms with high levels of student engagement are not simply a result of “student quality.”

Depending on their prior experiences, attitudes, and perceptions, students can make it easier or more difficult to create a highly engaged classroom. But teachers are not limited to poor learning results because students are not engaged. When educators examine more closely the characteristics of engaging instruction, they can begin to identify the elements that contribute to high levels of student engagement. These elements are a combination of the background of students and the influence and expectations of family and peers, but they also include schoolwide and classroom practices.

For teachers to deal with levels of poor student performance, they must begin to reflect on the elements that contribute to student engagement. Teachers can have direct control and make changes instantaneously in some areas. For other changes to occur, it will take time to develop new skills for both the student and the teacher, plan and seek out new solutions, or work on making changes at the schoolwide level.

Regardless of the time it takes to make significant changes to improve student engagement practices, educators should become familiar with the two basic elements that together provide the roadmap for teachers to focus on and facilitate student engagement. These elements are: preconditions and pedagogy.

Preconditions

Preconditions are the factors that must be in place even before classroom instruction begins. The factors are:

Learning relationships. Most students will not do their best in classes when they feel that teachers do not have an interest in them

or care about their future. Students can sense whether the teacher cares or is simply “going through the motions.” All of the characteristics that we know about building relationships are essential to contributing to highly engaged classroom instruction. Students show increased effort in classroom activities when teachers take an interest in students as individuals, get to know them by name, and talk to them not only in the classroom but during other activities in the school as well.

Rewards and incentives. There is much discussion within education communities, researchers, and practitioners about the role that rewards play in stimulating student work. Probably every teacher at some point has used a “bribe” of food, recreation, or some other reward to encourage students to finish a project or to follow a specific procedure, such as being quiet in a classroom.

There is some concern, and rightly so, that if rewards are used routinely, students are only exhibiting the learning behavior to receive the reward. When the reward disappears, the behavior will stop. Rewards and incentives do have their place, but they must be incorporated carefully.

A key to effective use of rewards is whether it is offered in advance of a behavior. A bad use of the reward system is when a teacher says to students, “If you are quiet for the next 30 minutes, you will get a piece of candy.” In this scenario, the student associates the behavior with the reward. It is a better practice to routinely and spontaneously give the reward after the behavior.

Grades are the big incentive system in schools. Students do the work, but often they do the minimal amount of work possible in order to receive the grade. Some students even openly avoid doing any work that is not tied to a grade. In this scenario, students see their learning experiences as meaningless activities, but they have

Preconditions are the factors that must be in place even before classroom instruction begins. The factors are: relationships, rewards and incentives, guiding principles, habits, and fundamental skills.

to get the good grade to move on toward the next phase of their lives.

Where could students have gotten this gross misunderstanding of the importance of grades? It is the fruition of how we as educators have misguided students as to what is important. We have tried to spur student engagement in otherwise boring and meaningless activities by tying it directly to a grade, by giving a reward in hopes that students would complete their school work.

Also many students, from prior experiences in school feel labeled as “C” or “D” learners and see little motivation to improve their efforts. Grades are not a motivation to these students, who are comfortable in completing very little of their work or skip it altogether. Many schools need to reexamine grading policies both at the schoolwide and classroom level to ensure that this reward system provides a situation in which students are encouraged to work hard.

In general, teachers need to reflect on the appropriate use of rewards in the classroom. The goal should be to build a stronger student perspective on intrinsic motivation as an incentive for student work and student learning, such as the pride of completing a difficult task or the satisfaction that comes from a job well done.

There is not a perfect grading system or time to give or withhold rewards. However, schools and teachers need to constantly examine current practices and consider changes that will increase the level of student engagement with respect to using incentives and rewards.

Guiding principles. These are positive character attributes and appropriate behaviors for achieving in school and becoming good citizens as adults. In recent years, however, many schools have moved away from programs that deal with behavioral issues and

character education to avoid divisive community debates about whether schools should be teaching anything beyond the 3 Rs.

The development of a child's character and appropriate behavior is first and foremost the responsibility of the family, but schools can play a strong supporting role. Schools with the highest levels of student achievement do not sidestep the issue of character education. They embrace it. These schools acknowledge that their success is due in large measure to their attention to guiding principles, through which they have been able to create the supportive learning environment that is essential for students to achieve high standards.

Following are some guiding principles used by many schools.

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Contemplation
- Compassion
- Initiative
- Adaptability
- Perseverance
- Honesty
- Optimism
- Trustworthiness
- Courage
- Loyalty

Habits. These are the routines and procedures that teachers create in the classroom. Habits include the way that students enter a classroom or engage in an activity at the start of every class period. Other habits include the ways that students open and organize

materials that they need for the day, move from large to small groups for various activities, and work on individual problems.

Teachers can create improved classroom environments and higher levels of student engagement if they focus on appropriate procedures and have students practice those procedures until they become habits. When students fail to follow the procedures, teachers need remind them of the rules and ways in which they can practice them. Good habits help to make effective use of classroom instructional time and reduce the disruption that distracts students from the learning process. It is through practices that these procedures become powerful habits and keep students engaged in learning.

Fundamental skills. These are the basic necessities that all students need to be able to participate in class and complete their work. Student need basic reading skills, for example, to be able to understand directions and materials used in any subject area. Students also need to acquire the skills to facilitate discussions and to learn how to listen to the teacher as well as other students in group discussions. They also need basic skills in technology when doing Internet research or preparing PowerPoint presentations. In addition, students need to learn basic social skills. To function in the classroom and workforce and as responsible citizens, they have to learn how to greet others, respect space, resolve conflicts, and ask questions. Teachers should ensure that students have these skills through pre-assessment and by constantly monitoring student engagement levels.

Pedagogy

The following key aspects of pedagogy help teachers create an environment in which rigorous and relevant learning can take place.

Designing for rigorous and relevant learning. One of the barriers to high levels of student engagement is the lack of rigorous and relevant instruction. While it is essential that students acquire fundamental skills before they proceed to more complex work, teachers should not keep students hostage by implying that they must complete all the isolated basics before they have the opportunity to engage in challenging and applied learning experiences. Relevance is just as critical as rigor. Relevance can help create conditions and motivation necessary for students to make the personal investment required for rigorous work or optimal learning. Students invest more of themselves, work harder, and learn better when the topic is interesting and connected to something that they already know.

Personalized learning. Each student brings a unique set of characteristics to the classroom. Every one has different background knowledge, a unique learning style, a variety of interests, and varied parental support and expectations. To anticipate that each of them will learn in the same way, at the same speed, and using the same material is an unrealistic expectation.

Some teachers fall into the false assumption that the student is the failure when he or she fails to demonstrate adequate achievement. But often it is the lack of personalizing learning that is the source of failure. There are many individual practices and strategies that contribute to overall personalization. As a start, teachers can create a more engaging classroom situation by getting to know their students and using examples during instruction that relate to their background, culture, and prior experiences.

Parent involvement also is a part of personalizing learning. By reaching out to parents and establishing cooperation and support for learning expectations, teachers are able to achieve greater personalization.

The key aspects of pedagogy that help teachers create an environment in which rigorous and relevant learning can take place are: personalized learning, active learning strategies, focus on reading, and creating the ideal classroom environment.

Students also need to experience differentiated instruction that is not constantly large group instruction moving at the same rate of speed. There should be opportunities and challenges for them to do individual assignments, to work at their own speed — to move more slowly on more difficult material or move more quickly on concepts or skills in which they have higher proficiency levels.

Active learning strategies. While it may sometimes be efficient to have students listen to a short lecture, view video material, or read a textbook, doing these types of isolating, sedentary activities on constant basis becomes mind numbing rather than mind engaging. There are strategies that naturally contribute to a much higher level of student engagement. For example, cooperative learning strategies in which students are organized into structured discussion groups and play specific roles in the brainstorming process in analyzing problems and seeking solutions are more engaging than listening to a long lecture. Moreover, varying instructional strategies adds interest and increases engagement. Even the most exciting activities, if done constantly, lose their appeal.

Focus on reading. It may seem as a misplacement to talk about literacy as a key ingredient in student engagement. However, many successful schools emphasize the importance of focusing on literacy instruction for continuous learning in all subjects.

Having a literacy focus means that every teacher, regardless of his or her subject area, knows the reading levels of the materials that they are working with, whether the material is incorporated in textbooks, classroom directions, Internet-based resources, or other reading sources. They also know the reading levels of their students. They are able to match the gaps of expected reading materials in the classroom with individual students and identify where there are significant gaps that might require a change in instructional strategy.

Teachers also need to incorporate vocabulary strategies as part of their individual course instruction. Paying attention to specific terms related to a topic of discussion and using strategies to gradually introduce and reinforce the vocabulary leads to comprehension and better student engagement in every subject course. Teachers need to use comprehension strategies such as pre-reading and summarization that provide an opportunity for students to be more engaged in a required piece of reading for a particular instructional activity. Reading is fundamental and cuts across all learning. If teachers expect high levels of student engagement, they need to pay attention to reading levels and establish instructional strategies with literacy as a primary focus in all they do.

Creating the ideal classroom environment. All of the previously identified variables can contribute to an ideal classroom environment. With these variables, good instruction can take place in a variety of environments. However, there is no question that better designed and better maintained classroom facilities have a positive impact on student engagement. Classrooms should be physically comfortable for students in temperature, space, furniture, and structural organization. Classrooms also need to be mentally stimulating, with attractive displays that include samples of student work, and colorful designs. Good teachers pay attention to the physical learning environment and any changes to that environment that become obstacles to student learning.

Learning Relationships



Chapter 5

Improving Engagement Through School Culture

Creating the Right Balance

What teachers and students believe, along with their collective behaviors, defines the culture.

School culture is the observable behaviors and actions of people coupled with the visible aspect of the “things” — school building, displays, possessions, appearance, and equipment. What teachers and students believe, along with their collective behaviors, defines the culture.

Many educators accept a school’s culture as a given, even though often they become frustrated because the ingrained culture — the “way” of doing things — does not make room for new initiatives and programs that promote a change in structure or learning strategy. But, school culture can be changed to include new ways of encouraging student engagement practices. To begin this process of change, schools need to focus on three key elements of a positive, nurturing school culture.

Practices are the individual initiatives that can, over time, begin to influence culture. The success of these practices requires persistence and follow-up.

Conversation is the most important transformer of school culture. People, and students in particular, can change what they believe to be true. However, they need an opportunity to express their opinions to test out a new belief. Leaders begin to change the culture by cultivating conversations in which ideas can be introduced, challenged, and contemplated. What we talk about in school matters. Teachers, administrators, and others can influence the beliefs in school by paying attention to the topics of conversation. They encourage discussion that moves in the direction of the positive culture the school wishes to adopt.

Artifacts are the tangible evidence of a particular school culture. Examples include academic award banners and displays of student work. Introduce, move, or replace the artifacts to begin to influence the characteristics of the culture.

Benchmark Tasks for Student Engagement

Pervasive	Considerable	Partial	Initiated	Absent	
					Student Learning
					Establish Learning Criteria and data measures that relate to student engagement and personal skills development.
					Analyze Learning Criteria data on Core Academic and Stretch Learning related to student engagement.
					Analyze data on improvement of the Learning Criteria on Student Engagement.
					School Culture
					Foster a school culture that provides students with a sense of equity.
					Foster a school culture that provides students with a feeling of community.
					Foster a school culture that provides students with expansive opportunities.
					Foster a school culture that provides students with individual responsibility.
					Foster a school culture that provides students with challenging experiences.
					Foster a school culture of high expectations.
					Involve staff in discussions to understand, embrace, and reflect on the need for student engagement.
					Establish and implement guiding principles in the school.
					Celebrate achievement.
					Establish common definitions of student engagement and how to measure it.
					Make instructional coaches available to assist teachers in improving strategies for better engagement practices.
					Conduct student and staff focus groups to determine ways to improve engagement.
					Review and revise school grading policies to encourage high levels of student engagement.
					Instructional Practice
					Identify and share examples of positive student engagement.
					Develop staff ability to create classroom procedures that build learning relationships.
					Encourage teachers to personalize instruction to accommodate unique student needs.
					Make literacy an important priority throughout the school.
					Conduct frequent walkthroughs to observe instruction.
					Provide for and monitor classroom space to ensure that it is safe, clean, adequate in size, properly equipped, and well maintained.



REFLECTING ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

✿ Purpose

The following ten checklists are useful for staff and school leaders to reflect on the characteristics necessary for high levels of student engagement. These checklists cover many areas of school culture and teacher practice. Reflecting on the checklists will be useful in conversations on how to improve student engagement and in identifying areas of strength and areas in need of improvement.

✿ Procedure

The checklists may be used individually to review one aspect of engagement, or they may be used as a group to complete a more comprehensive reflection on school culture and student engagement. The lists are designed for teacher leader teams to reflect on school characteristics. They are best used by a group.

The group should read each items and reach consensus as to the rating. After reviewing the entire list, the group can then focus on those characteristics that are lowest rated and begin conversations on how school improvement practices can address each characteristic.

The checklists should be reviewed periodically to measure progress.

Relationships Checklist

Definitely	Partially	Not Observed	
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	1. The teachers exhibit behaviors that indicate care and concern about students.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	2. The teachers call students by name.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	3. The teachers are familiar with the school community and surrounding neighborhood.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	4. The teachers take an interest in students' education plans and future goals.



Definitely	Partially	Not Observed	
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	5. Students have opportunities to ask teachers questions about what they are learning.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	6. The teachers talk with parents regularly, including providing positive feedback on student work.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	7. The teachers are willing to provide extra help.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	8. The teachers treat students with respect.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	9. The teachers pay attention to all students, not just to the top students.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	10. The teachers make students feel that they belong (are accepted and liked) at school.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	11. The teachers talk with their students in settings outside of class.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	12. Students feel comfortable enough to ask their teachers questions.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	13. The teachers trust students.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	14. Students work well in groups.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	15. Students treat other students with respect.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	16. The teachers expect students to do their best at all times.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	17. Students feel supported by their teachers.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	18. Classroom interactions reflect collaborative working relationships among students and between teacher and students.
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	19. The teachers frequently talk to other students outside of class.