

## Chapter 26

# Inducing Long-Term, Positive Behavior Change: Leveraging Student Empowerment to Effect Long-Term Change

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The focus of this chapter is to highlight two different transformational change initiatives in public schools that rely on student leadership to be effective. Both programs will explore effective ways to empower students as leaders, to make better social decisions, and to improve their attachment to school and community. One program involves a student-led technology club in a middle school. The goal of the club is to assist with the school's technology usage while also making a positive impact on participating students' achievement and attachment to school. The other program involves educating high school students on the risks of heroin and opioid addiction. Both programs seek to leverage student empowerment to induce long-term, positive behavior change in the students directly involved as well as those around them.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The chapter seeks to provide concrete examples of programs of transformational behavior change for students through student empowerment, student leadership, and positive decision making. More specifically, the objectives are to provide a theoretical background of key issues, highlight expected benefits, problems, and to provide research based solutions and recommendations.

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## **BACKGROUND**

Research suggests that low student attachment to school is a widespread national problem, citing that only about 50% of youth in schools report feeling connected to school (Klem & Connell, 2004). This should be of great concern to educators because students' connectedness and attachment to school is also a strong indicator of their health, general well-being, and social and emotional wellness (Blum, 2005; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009). The CDC (2009) reports the following:

*Students who feel connected to school 1) are more likely to attend school regularly, stay in school longer, and have higher grades and test scores, 2) are less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or have sexual intercourse, 3) are less likely to carry weapons, become involved in violence, or be injured from dangerous activities such as drinking and driving or not wearing seat belts, and 4) are less likely to have emotional problems, suffer from eating disorders, or experience suicidal thoughts or attempts. (p. 1)*

Moreover, students' connectedness and attachment to school is even more of an indicator of future wellness for students who are already considered at risk of being alienated by peers, such as students with disabilities, LGBTQ students, or students who are homeless or chronically truant (CDC, 2009).

In addition, there is great risk for students who form the wrong connections and attachments. According to Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, and Radosevich (1979), Social learning theory proposes that at-risk behavior, such as drug use, is developed through a process of observation and experience. Individuals who form a sense of belonging to a social group will often be influenced to adjust their norms and expectations. This process, sometimes regrettably, provides models for imitation.

More specifically, peer association was the single most important predictor of adolescent drug use (Akers et al., 1979). The researchers indicated that peer behavior was considered to have its greatest effect on first time drug users and their use is positively associated with the amount of time spent with friends. Consequently, if peer association can have such a strong influence on negative behavior, it should also make an impact through positive experiences, provide peer role models for young people, and ultimately have the ability to somewhat diminish future delinquent or criminal acts (Wortley, 1996).

Furthermore, research suggests that educational programs embracing a philosophy of student empowerment have been shown to minimize unnecessary stress and improve mental health in students (Mousavi, Sohrabpour, Anderson, Stemig-Vindedahl, Golden, Christenson, & Bühlmann, 2018). In a study on the impact of student empowerment, Mousavi et. al (2018) conducted an evaluation of a three-year program aimed to increase mental health awareness for University of Minnesota graduate students. The study involved a student survey that was administered before and after the program intervention. The educators in the program embraced principles of student empowerment, such as asking students for help when appropriate, discussing policies with students, asking for their opinions, and publicly supporting student activities to educate them on mental health awareness. The results revealed positive trends in students' attitudes, perceptions, and relationships with their peers. As a result, the authors recommend an emphasis on student empowerment to address our nation's mental health challenge (Mousavi et. al, 2018).

Moreover, student belongingness to a group or extracurricular club is found to give students a deep sense of belonging and pride, enhancing their overall school experience, achievement, and attachment to school (Bayat, 2015). Sheninger and Murray (2017) stress that school leadership is most effective when it involves student empowerment, proclaiming that the best school leaders empower others to lead themselves. Martin (2018) also stresses the necessity of empowerment as a guide towards moving

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