

How Interest-Driven Learning Drives Student Engagement

Lessons from Student Changemakers

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OVERVIEW

Student Changemakers begins with a simple premise: when students have the right tools, they can help improve their schools and communities. For years, the Rennie Center has partnered with adults to conduct research that informs decision making. Student Changemakers extends this approach to students themselves. Through structured inquiry and explicit instruction in community engagement, research, and communication, students learn to investigate issues they care about and share findings that inform action.

After attending the Rennie Center's annual Condition of Education Summit (COE) this January, twelve students were asked: "If you could tell education leaders and policymakers one thing, what would you share?" Their answer was simple and urgent: If you want us to show up to school, give us something to care about.

“There are things that we can change if we put our work into it. There are people that will listen to us.”
- Student Changemaker

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Students are more likely to attend school consistently when they feel invested in their learning and connected to opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. Chronic absenteeism in Massachusetts public schools grew by 72% between 2019 and 2023, and rates across all grade levels remain well above pre-pandemic levels ([cite](#)). Among elementary students, the proportion missing more than 10% of class time in a year has more than doubled since before the pandemic ([cite](#)).

At the same time, student disengagement remains a persistent challenge nationwide. A 2024 Gallup poll found that 41% of K-12 students reported learning nothing interesting in the previous week, with disengagement highest among students who do not plan to pursue college. Together, these trends point to a clear need for learning experiences that are relevant, applied, and connected to students' lives.

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Skill-focused project-based learning offers one promising response, especially when embedded in students' core program of study rather than treated as an add-on. When students actively apply knowledge rather than passively receive it, research shows stronger academic outcomes, deeper understanding, and higher motivation. Project-based learning also creates opportunities to practice durable skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and communication in authentic contexts.

However, project-based learning often asks students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems without clear guidance on how that transition happens. Students receive limited instruction in how to collect and analyze information, interpret findings, or engage communities in settings where information is often incomplete or inconsistent. Skills needed to navigate these environments, such as communication and collaboration, are also often assumed rather than intentionally developed. As a result, many projects reinforce classroom knowledge instead of advancing learning that can impact students' lives.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) directly addresses this gap by positioning young people as researchers of issues affecting their schools and communities. Through YPAR, students receive explicit instruction in research and analytical methods often associated with higher education and professional settings. They learn qualitative and quantitative approaches such as survey design, interviews, data collection, and data analysis. Students then examine patterns in their findings, interpret evidence, draw reasoned conclusions, and strengthen communication skills by presenting results to peers, educators, and community decision-makers. By equipping students with the tools to investigate real issues and share evidence-based insights, YPAR connects academic learning to meaningful civic action.

PROJECT INSIGHTS

In 2022, the Rennie Center launched Student Changemakers, a program designed to bridge academic learning with real-world application. In partnership with curriculum experts and Britebound (formerly American Student Assistance), the Rennie Center developed a 20-lesson curriculum rooted in YPAR that can be integrated directly into credit-bearing academic courses. The program aligns with Massachusetts requirements that students in eighth grade and high school complete at least one student-led, nonpartisan civics project focused on researching and addressing issues in their communities.

Student Changemakers amplifies student voice and agency by providing meaningful opportunities to influence decisions within schools and communities. Over the course of the program, students identify issues they care about, gather and analyze data, collaborate with peers, and develop actionable recommendations. Through this process, they apply classroom learning to real challenges while strengthening critical thinking, analysis, and communication skills. The experience also exposes students to career pathways connected to research, data analysis, and civic engagement.



PROJECT INSIGHTS (cont.)

At the conclusion of the curriculum, students present findings and recommendations to adults in positions of authority, including school leaders and elected officials. Participating students have helped launch a middle school substance abuse prevention initiative and establish a community fridge to support students experiencing food insecurity. At TechBoston Academy, Changemakers students founded Quality Homes for Humankind (QHH), a youth-led 501(c)(3) organization focused on supporting community members in securing stable housing and building workforce pathways. They later brought their work to the Rennie Center’s Condition of Education Summit, tabling at the event, approaching policymakers, and presenting their findings to leaders across the state, including former Secretary of Education Patrick Tutwiler.

To date, Changemakers has been piloted in four Massachusetts schools, engaging 85 students in grades 6-12. To assess impact, the Rennie Center collected both quantitative and qualitative data from participating students and educators. The results indicate meaningful growth. During the 2023-24 school year, a wide range of student participants reported an average 12% increase in confidence across core research and communication skills. The proportion of students who described themselves as “empowered” or “very empowered” to shape decisions at their school increased by 36% from the beginning to the end of the program.

Educator feedback reinforces these findings. Teachers consistently reported high levels of student engagement, particularly among students who had previously not engaged with more traditional instructional approaches. One educator noted that “through their participation in Changemakers, students have developed skills in teamwork, communication, research, data analysis, presentation, and public speaking.” Educators also highlighted growth in students’ communication, literacy, reasoning, media literacy, and overall sense of empowerment.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Experiences from Student Changemakers suggest that when students investigate issues affecting their lives and communities, engagement, attendance, and a sense of belonging grow. The program stands apart from many project-based learning models through its explicit focus on equipping students with the skills and understanding needed to investigate real issues and inform decision-making in their schools and communities. Over the past three years, our work with students has surfaced several lessons for strengthening engagement and relevance in classrooms:

- 1. Connect skill development to real issues.** Learning becomes more meaningful when students apply academic concepts to challenges affecting their schools and communities.
- 2. Teach transferable inquiry skills.** Explicit instruction in research, analysis, communication, and collaboration prepares students to apply classroom learning beyond school.
- 3. Provide voice and choice in learning.** When students shape the questions they investigate, motivation and ownership increase.
- 4. Create authentic audiences for student work.** Presenting findings to educators, policymakers, and community leaders shows students how their ideas can inform real decisions.

Together, these lessons suggest that when students are equipped with the tools to investigate real issues and share their findings with authentic audiences, learning becomes more engaging, more relevant, and more connected to the communities schools serve.