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All About Engagement

The bell rings, and twenty-seven students spill into the room. Someone announces they forgot their lunchbox. Two students are arguing about the pencil sharpener, and three more are wandering as if they've never seen this room before, even though it's the third month of school.

It's just a typical morning in a typical classroom. But it's not what most of us pictured when we dreamed of becoming teachers.

Most of us came into teaching with visions of inspiring curious, happily busy learners. We imagined kids leaning in during read-alouds, racing to start their work, and asking the kind of thoughtful questions that push the whole class forward. They might even cheer at the end of a particularly moving lesson. Well. . . *probably* not. But maybe?

Then reality hits. We find ourselves prodding a room full of students who tune us out before we even finish giving directions. And the only cheering is for pizza day in the cafeteria. Days disappear into the countless reminders and redirections it takes just to keep everyone pointed in roughly the same direction.

But a life of constant reminders takes a toll. So we hunt for something (anything!) that will get students to do what we've already asked them to do a hundred times. Surely the next system will be the right one and behavior will finally click into place. That's why we turn to the clip chart the teacher next door swears by. And when that doesn't help, we try the schoolwide system of awarding points. Some of our kids thrive, but it's mainly those who already have the skills to regulate their behavior. The points do little to help the kids lacking those skills. Then we move onto punch tickets, behavior bingo, and maybe even flat-out bribes that turn into threats as our patience evaporates.

It seems like these systems should work. Everyone told us they would. So when they inevitably fall short, we wonder if *we're* the problem. Maybe we aren't doing it right. Maybe we aren't

consistent enough, firm enough, or organized enough. Or maybe our students' needs are bigger than any of these strategies can handle.

But you're not the problem, and your kids aren't the problem either. The real problem is that we've been tasked with building an entire management system on the shifting sand of student engagement.

Engagement is never static. It rises and falls throughout the day, responding to difficulty, boredom, energy, discomfort, emotion, and the thousand outside forces students carry with them into the room. In the golden moments when students are deeply invested, behavior management is almost unnecessary because attention itself is doing the heavy lifting. But those moments are always fleeting. And if your whole system depends on engagement staying steady, the moment it slips, the system slips with it. No clip chart or marble jar can change the tide. They can only respond to it. Until we learn to work *with* engagement's rise and fall instead of against it, every outside system will keep falling short.

The Power of Engagement

We want students to make positive, helpful choices on their own. But those kinds of choices depend on two things: the ability to regulate impulses, and the drive to do it.

Leo may want to raise his hand and wait to be called on, but since he lacks the self-regulation to make that choice, desire alone can't get him there. And forcing Leo to clip down on his behavior chart after he blurts out is not giving him any tools to do better.

On the other hand, Mira may have the ability to wait to be called on, but not the motivation to do so. The payoff for talking whenever she wants is greater than the payoff for waiting for a pizza party in three weeks when the class marble jar is full.

Even though Leo's and Mira's behaviors derive from different sources, they both have the same need: engagement. When students are genuinely engaged, the task they are involved in supports their regulation. Leo has something meaningful enough to anchor his attention and body, which lowers the strain on his still-developing self-control. For Mira, the lesson itself becomes immediately rewarding enough that participating appropriately feels worthwhile. That is why engagement is not separate from classroom management. It *is* classroom management. Without it, everything falls apart.

Meeting expectations for behavior and learning takes effort, and students are only willing to invest that effort if the reward is strong enough. If a task feels boring, too difficult, or confusing, students have no incentive to try. In the short term, that disengagement means spending your Tuesday afternoon cajoling a room full of reluctant third graders to finish their math assignment instead of playing hangman on their papers. In the long term, chronic disengagement places students at greater risk for academic failure, school avoidance, and even dropping out altogether.¹

¹ Lovelace, M. D., Reschly, A. L., Appleton, J. J., & Lutz, M. E. (2014). Concurrent and Predictive Validity of the Student Engagement Instrument. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 32(6), 509–520.

Considering engagement's impact on student success, it's surprising there's no single agreed-upon definition. After all, engagement is easy enough to recognize, and you definitely know when it's missing. Still, we need a common frame of reference. So for the purposes of this book, we define student engagement as *the degree of a student's positive involvement and willing participation in what is happening in class*.

Signs of Engagement		
Behavioral Signs	Emotional Signs	Cognitive Signs
Paying attention	Sense of belonging	Putting in extra effort
Regulating body movement	Positive peer interactions	Thinking beyond easy answers
Talking when appropriate	Excited to learn	Persisting through difficulty
Contributing to discussions	Confident in their ability	Initiating work independently
Using materials correctly	Enjoys being in class	Asking for help when stuck

Signs of Disengagement		
Behavioral Signs	Emotional Signs	Cognitive Signs
Zoning out	Withdrawal	Indifference to the quality of work
Excessive fidgeting	Negative peer interactions	Doing the minimum to get by
Side conversations	Anxious or bored	Giving up quickly
Distracting others	Low confidence	Waiting for redirection
Misusing materials	Frustration or outbursts	Sitting when stuck

Participating in lessons might be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of engagement, but that's only part of the picture. An engaged student is *positively involved and willing to participate* behaviorally and emotionally, as well as cognitively. Engaged students complete assignments, but they are also willing to walk quietly in the hallway and contribute to group discussions.

Behavioral engagement is the most visible layer. This is about participation. It's the student who is paying attention, managing their body, and completing routines. This also includes a student's willingness to meet expectations across different settings, whether that's at a desk, on the playground, or with a group. A behaviorally engaged student can read the room and adjust.

Emotional engagement is the reaction happening beneath the surface. It's the student who feels like they belong in your classroom, shows excitement about learning, and

enjoys being at school. This kind of engagement is the invisible current shaping whether students are willing to participate in the first place.

Cognitive engagement is the deepest level. It's the student who pushes past the easy first answer, makes connections between ideas, and sticks with hard problems instead of giving up. Cognitive engagement reflects how actively involved students are in their learning. This goes beyond whether they're doing the work to how much of themselves they're putting into it.

When students stop feeling connected to school, they eventually stop showing up for it. Maybe not physically, but academically. Studies tracking thousands of students over multiple years found that behavioral disengagement is the most reliable predictor of dropout risk.² But behavioral disengagement usually starts with emotional disengagement. Students who feel they belong at the start of the year are the ones finishing their work in April.³

Though this may sound grim, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement aren't three separate problems to manage. They're three layers of the same dynamic. Once you can see the layers, you can read the room more accurately when engagement starts to slip.

Unlike so many parts of the school day, engagement is one where you hold a lot of cards. That's engagement isn't a fixed trait, like personality. It grows from the interaction between a student and their environment, and it responds to change.⁴ Many factors outside your control influence students' behavior, but engagement is where you can make up the difference. You can't fix a student's home life, but you can create a predictable classroom where everyone feels safe enough to learn. You can't wave away a learning struggle, but can pique students' interest with a surprising lesson that makes the extra effort worthwhile.

That's the power of engagement. It's how you meet students where they are and help them move forward. And since you can't pour a bucket of engagement into the room one time and call it good, you need a reliable framework to help sustain it all year long.

Balancing Structure and Spark

Student engagement comes down to balancing the two energetic forces of structure and spark.

Think of it as an old-timey balance scale with two buckets on either side (Figure 1.1). One bucket is structure and the other bucket is spark. In the middle, when it's more or less balanced, is the sweet spot of student engagement that we're aiming for.

²Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Fallu, J.-S., & Pagani, L. S. (2009). Student Engagement and Its Relationship with Early High School Dropout. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32(3), 651–670.

³Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from School. *Review of Educational Research*, 59(2), 117–142.

⁴Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 61.

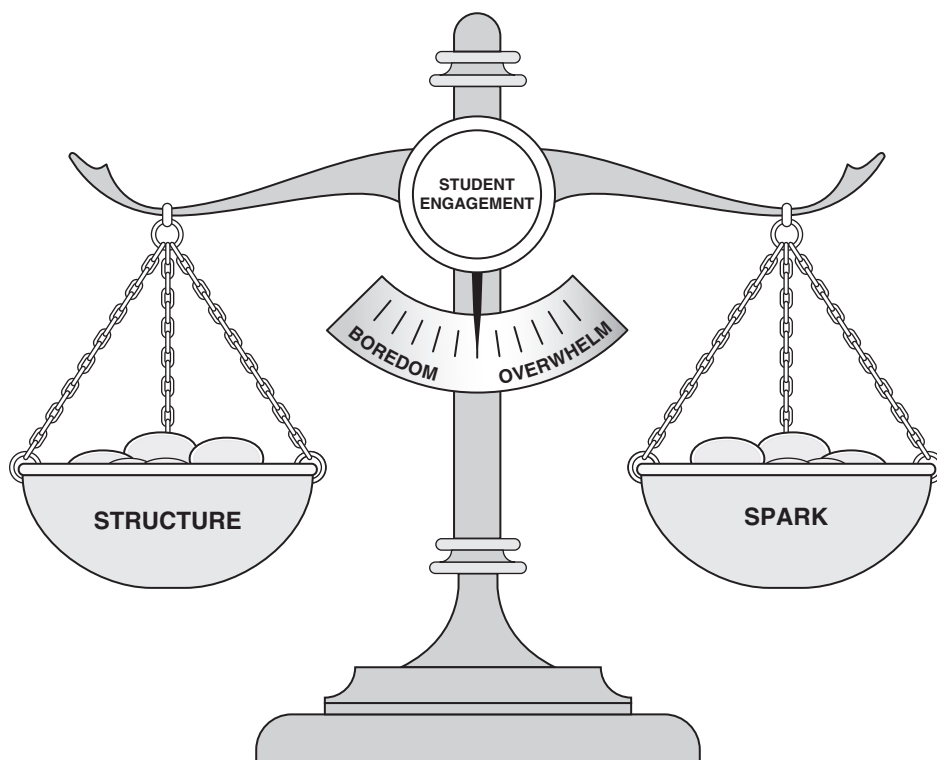


Figure 1.1 Illustration of the ideal balance of structure and spark in student engagement.

Structure

Classroom structure is the intentional design of routines, expectations, and systems that shape how students move and interact throughout the day. The purpose of structure isn't to control students, but to control uncertainty so students can focus on learning. Have you ever turned down the music in your car when trying to navigate an unfamiliar area? It's not because silence sharpens your vision; it's because your brain needed fewer distractions before it could solve the problem.

Classrooms work the same way. When the environment feels unpredictable or overstimulating, students don't have the bandwidth to also worry about mastering division. They're too busy just trying to make it to lunch without getting in trouble. Structure reduces that emotional load. It lays out how to be successful, so students are free to focus on doing their best.

Which is why we recommend kicking off the first day of school with the most important thing you'll teach all year: how to get to the bathroom. Yes, we are serious! If you're a student with a nervous tummy, it doesn't matter how interesting the teacher's get-to-know-me slides are or how fun the icebreaker game is. How could you possibly jump into a "Find Someone

Who. . .” game if the only thought in your head is: *Am I going to have an accident? In front of everybody? On the FIRST DAY!?*

When students trust their needs are met, they don’t have to spend mental energy bracing for what comes next. That energy gets redirected toward discovering where they belong in their new space and which of their classmates also has a pet hamster.

This is where structure and management become inseparable. Many of the most frustrating behaviors are actually byproducts of uncertainty. Think about what happens when a substitute teacher takes over your class. Suddenly, even your most reliable students act like entirely different kids. It’s (probably) not that your students have been waiting for an opportunity to unleash their inner gremlins. It’s just their nervous systems responding to a situation that feels unsafe—even if there is no actual danger. When the usual guardrails disappear, students unconsciously test the edges of what’s allowed.

Steady structure solves this by removing the guesswork. **When you prepare students for what’s ahead, set clear expectations, and follow through with predictable consequences, students are far less likely to make off-track choices because the path forward is obvious.**

In that sense, we use structure to proactively design environments where fewer problems emerge in the first place. Predictability creates psychological safety, and students who feel safe are more able to regulate themselves, participate appropriately, and stay engaged in learning.

Common forms of structure in the classroom include:

- Intentional community building
- Routines and procedures
- Clear rules and expectations
- Teacher self-regulation
- Classroom organization
- Predictable consequences
- Class jobs and responsibilities
- Seating arrangements
- Social-emotional practices
- Defined use of materials
- Efficient transitions
- Expectations for voice levels

Structure also benefits you because of *social contagion*. If you’ve ever walked into a room where everyone is laughing and started smiling before you knew what was funny, that’s social contagion at play. Humans are social creatures. We’re attuned to what others are doing and are

wired to go along with the group.⁵ Strong classroom structure helps that instinct work in your favor. When most of the group is calmly lining up, the others tend to follow along.

Maybe you've had a new student join mid-year and watched them easily adapt to routines that took the rest of your class weeks to master at the start of the year. It's not that your new student is particularly gifted at following directions. The class already has a rhythm, and the new student steps into it. Well-built structure allows the class itself to carry some of the load, instead of everything resting on you.

Social contagion cuts both ways, though. The same instinct that pulls students into calm can just as quickly pull them into chaos. Two students sneak over to fill their water bottles during work time, and suddenly there's a line of apparently dehydrated children desperate to top up too. That's the risk. But once you understand how contagion works, you can use it to your advantage, making sure that calm spreads instead of distraction.

Spark

On the opposite side of our scale, we have spark. Spark is novelty. It means doing things in fresh or unexpected ways so that students want to lean in instead of checking out. It's what turns a well-run classroom into one where students are genuinely invested.

Spark doesn't mean constant entertainment. Too much stimulation can overwhelm students just as too much structure can bore them. A spark is small. It's a tiny glow, not a full flame. The goal is to offer enough novelty to pique students' interest without sending their nervous systems into dysregulation. Moments of classroom spark should be teacher-led and fit into your schedule instead of feeling like an extra distraction.

Spark in the classroom might look like:

- Small changes to a familiar routine
- Adding an element of surprise
- Offering simple choices
- Laughter, jokes, and playfulness
- Partner or group collaboration
- Playing games
- Movement or hands-on elements
- Integrating creativity (art, acting, storytelling)
- Introducing a question or mystery to solve

⁵Burgess, L. G., Riddell, P. M., Fancourt, A., & Murayama, K. (2018). The Influence of Social Contagion Within Education: A Motivational Perspective. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 12, 164–174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12178>.

Spark is the *novelty effect* at work. The novelty effect is the brain's tendency to temporarily perk up when something feels even slightly different. The task may not change in any meaningful way, but that hint of newness is enough to kindle curiosity.

A change as small as letting students choose to complete an assignment in crayon or pencil can be enough to increase learning. This isn't because crayons promote deeper thinking (they don't). What changes is the student's willingness to begin and persist. Novelty makes a familiar task feel fresh. Even if students still choose pencils, just having an option boosts their investment. And once students are invested in a task, they're learning more from it.

Now, before you start encouraging students to complete every assignment in crayon, remember that the crayon isn't the strategy. Increased engagement is the strategy. The novelty of an unusual tool opens the door for that engagement. If you make crayons a standard option, you'll find students quickly lose interest in them. The novelty effect is short-lived, so crayons maintain their attention-grabbing power only as long as they feel unexpected.

When things are too predictable, the brain goes into energy-saving mode. It decides it already knows what's going to happen, so it stops paying close attention. Ever had to retrieve the frozen food box you just threw out because you couldn't remember the temperature? You read the directions, but you didn't really process them because nothing about the experience signaled it mattered, even though the information was important.

Spark interrupts that autopilot. It's how we use neuroscience to boost learning. When humans encounter something interesting or unexpected, our brains release two key neurotransmitters: acetylcholine and dopamine. We're instantly hooked. Acetylcholine keeps neurons activated, which makes it crucial to the learning process. Dopamine creates a sense of reward so that we want to keep going.

But this isn't just a one-off boost. In her book, *How to Build a Healthy Brain*, psychologist Kimberley Wilson explains it this way:

The next time we encounter a similar stimulus, those neurons are that little bit more ready to encode the information—they are ready to learn and grow. The more this cycle is repeated, the more active and connected the cells in that area become. So paying attention is actually one of the driving forces behind neuroplasticity (the capacity for your brain to reshape). Just the practice of concentrating on something can stimulate the release of compounds that can reshape your brain.⁶

Isn't it incredible to realize you were literally rewiring your students' brains by giving them the choice between a pencil and a crayon? That bit of novelty pulls them deeper into the activity.

And novelty doesn't just deepen learning, it improves behavior. A student who is genuinely curious and invested has no incentive to act out. That's why spark is behavior management, not just enrichment.

⁶Wilson, K. *How to Build a Healthy Brain: Reduce Stress, Anxiety and Depression and Future-Proof Your Brain*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2022, 229.

The Power of Structure and Spark

Structure gives students the predictability they need to feel settled. When the environment is steady and expectations are clear, their nervous systems relax enough to focus. Spark gives them a reason to stay with you instead of drifting. Together, they cover both sides of the behavior equation: being able to behave well and wanting to.

Here's what this balance of structure and spark looks like in action. Imagine a classroom on day eight of a year-end test review. Each day, partners are playing a matching game to review vocabulary words from past math units. Kids love games! This should be fun. But even fun activities can have short shelf lives.

Playing the same type of game multiple times can be beneficial because it allows kids to focus on the content (which is the point of the game) instead of having to master a new set of rules. However, playing the same game eight days in a row will demolish any sense of excitement. Too much structure induces boredom (Figure 1.2). Bored kids are not engaged. They're arguing with their partners and competing to toss game cards into the marker bin. In short, they've checked out and taken your lesson with them.

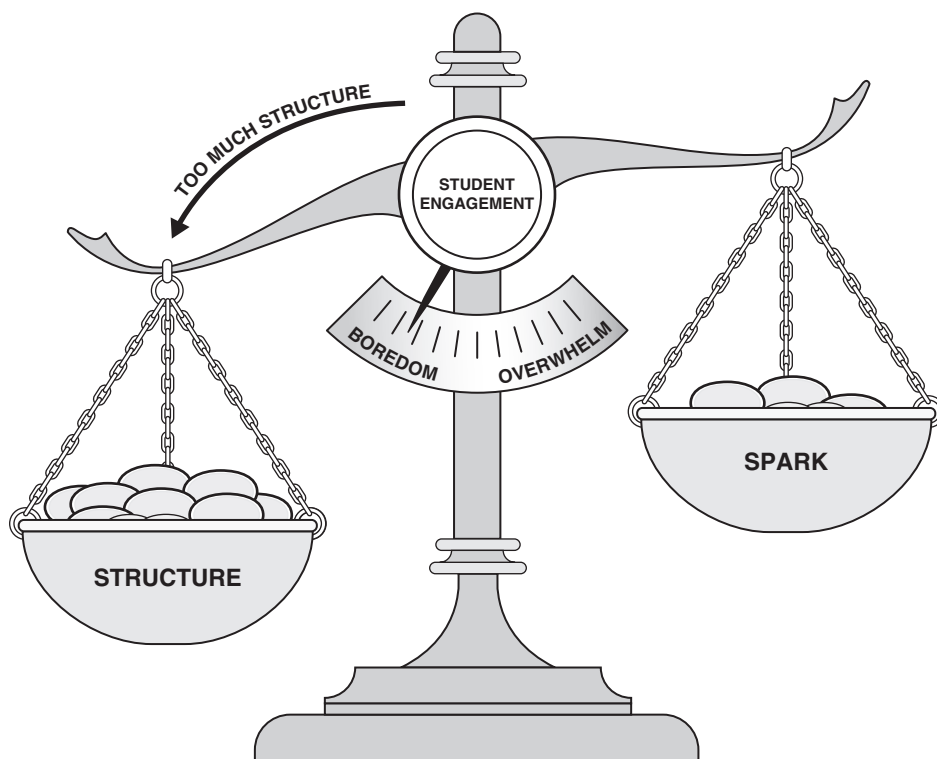


Figure 1.2 Student engagement disrupted by an overemphasis on structure.

To counter the weight of too much structure, you need to sprinkle in spark. A little goes a long way. You could keep the activity exactly the same but assign students to a new partner each day. That adds freshness to a stale activity without complicating the expectations.

However, maybe you've strategically assigned partners because you know these pairings are ideal for meeting behavioral and academic needs. In that case, you might want to preserve the structure of the partner system and change the activity. You could have two or three different styles of game and rotate through them. Providing a limited number of options creates controlled novelty.

You could also increase the level of competition to boost spark. Maybe the winner in each partnership gets five extra minutes of technology time for the day. Or maybe the whole class could compete against the clock to earn the three rounds of Heads Up, Seven Up.

The possibilities for sprinkling in novelty are endless. You could keep the game exactly as is but move it to a new location like an empty hallway near the front office. Or you could assign each partnership a different math unit and task them with creating the cards for other students to play.

But what you definitely should not do is introduce all these changes at once. One change (or maybe two) at a time is the perfect amount. If kids tip too far into spark, they become overwhelmed. And overwhelmed kids cannot learn because they feel stressed. They don't understand what is expected (Figure 1.3). Overwhelmed students are just as disengaged as the bored students, checked out but for a different reason.

Managing the balance between structure and spark is the work of teaching. And that balance doesn't happen on its own. You have to respond to what is happening in your room minute by minute, so you can adjust as needed.

Going back to Leo and Mira, their teacher could keep Leo from blurting out by providing structure in how she phrases her prompt. *Raise your hand if you can tell me the digit in the ten thousands place.* By stating the expected behavior (*Raise your hand. . .*) before naming the action (*tell me the digit. . .*), she's nudging Leo's brain toward the choice she wants him to make.

Now for Mira's spark. There are lots of options for adding it to a regular old math lesson. The teacher could prompt everyone to hold up the right number of fingers to show the digit in the ten thousands place. Or she could have students turn and talk to a partner to explain how they know which digit is correct. She could have students write their answers on their whiteboards so no one need talk at all. Or she could lean into the fun of talking and try a choral response. *On the count of three, everyone tell me the answer in your best squeaky mouse voice.*

Structure and spark ensure that everyone has the support to be successful. Structure helps Leo meet his need for belonging, so he is able to contribute in a productive way. Spark helps Mira meet her need for fun by providing excitement in a way that keeps her focused on learning. And the teacher meets her need to teach place value without having to remind, correct, or threaten.

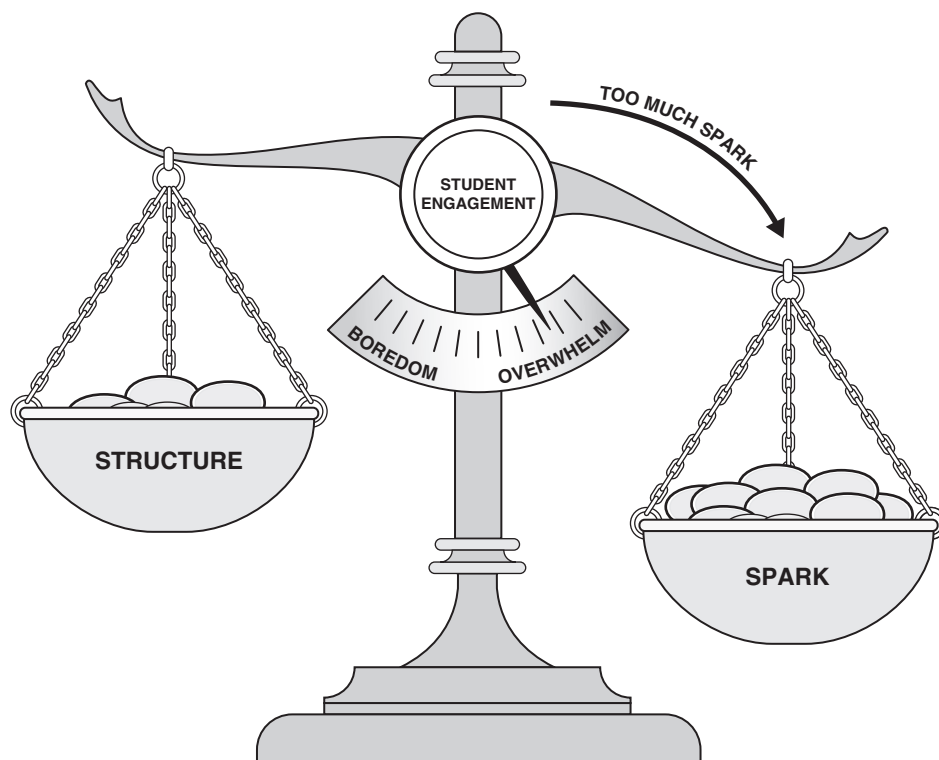


Figure 1.3 Too much spark tips the balance into overwhelm.

Engagement is malleable, but it's also fleeting. That single place value question filled maybe twenty seconds, or approximately 0.0926% of a school day. Just because every student was engaged during those twenty seconds doesn't mean they'll stay engaged for the next twenty seconds, or the twenty seconds after that, unless the teacher makes it happen.

If that sounds like a lot of work, that's because it is. Keeping kids in the engagement zone requires constant small tweaks of structure and spark to maintain the balance between boredom and overwhelm.

A student arriving late, a substitute teacher in music class, a last-minute change of the lunch schedule, or a burned-out light bulb are little disturbances, but they can quickly overflow that spark bucket and tip your class into overwhelm. On the other hand, necessary structures like seating arrangements, fast finisher options, and seat work can fuel boredom if you let them stagnate.

But just because maintaining engagement takes constant effort doesn't mean it's constantly draining. Once you have some practice spotting lopsided levels, you'll be able to reset the balance reflexively and keep minor imbalances from tipping into major hassles most of the time.

What makes this doable is the predictability. These energy fluctuations follow patterns, and when you can anticipate them, you can prepare your responses in advance. Instead of scrambling in a chaotic moment, you step into the situation already prepared to redirect it. Knowing how to balance the energy in your room allows you to pivot with purpose, instead of reacting out of frustration.

As you go through this book, you'll learn to predict when imbalances might occur, make a plan for preventing them, and master the tools for correcting any that manage to sneak in anyway.

Since the time of year is one of the biggest forces shaping classroom energy, this book is organized around the seasons. Not Mother Nature's four seasons, but the seven seasons of the school year. Starting dates, school breaks, and testing windows will vary from place to place so some of the seasons are hard to align to exact months. And some seasons may even be in a different order for you, especially in the spring. Adjust our examples to fit your calendar. If you teach outside the United States or follow a non-traditional schedule, the timing may shift, but the seasons still apply.

Our first season is Back-to-School, of course. The new books, the new pencils, the new little faces, it's all so exciting. . . and exhausting. You'll learn how to use these first few weeks to lay the foundation for an incredible school year.

Next comes the Season of Settling In. These are the golden days when classroom community is taking shape. Everyone is getting a sense of "this is our class and this is who we are." These early days of settling in have a special kind of magic. You'll learn how to make those Back-to-School foundations stick while sprinkling in the small sparks that keep engagement high.

Once the holidays enter the picture, you're into The Holiday Ramp-Up. The weeks before winter break are notorious for their chaos and high energy. You'll learn strategies for counterbalancing all that extra spark.

After the break, it's time for the Midyear Reset or the second first day of school. In this chapter, you'll learn how to use this season to course-correct and start the second half of the year off strong.

Before you know it, the winter blues will turn to Spring Fever. This is the season of chatter and distraction. You'll learn how to channel that energy instead of fighting it.

Then there's Testing Season. In this season with its strict protocols and demands, you'll learn how to keep your class engaged through review, testing days, and the emotional weight that comes with both.

And then, once Spring Fever and Testing Season are in the rearview mirror, it's time for the final season of the school year: The Home Stretch. You'll learn strategies to wrap up the year meaningfully and enjoy your last few weeks with your class.

No season is without its challenges, but none are without their joys either. When you know what to expect and how to respond, you’ll spend less time reacting to problems and more time enjoying your job. You’ll have the tools to keep your classroom steady, no matter what the season brings.

Try It Today

On a separate sheet of paper or using the table below, draft a rough date range for each season according to your school calendar. Then, if you’d like some extra credit, take a minute to jot down where students’ energy might be high or low in each season. Look for events like major holidays or long school breaks, but also factor in unscheduled distractions like too many days of indoor recess or late-spring fatigue. And once you’re done here, join us in Chapter 2 for a deep dive into the rollercoaster ride that is Back-to-School.

Season of the School Year	Date Range	Highs and Lows
Back-to-School Season		
The Season of Settling In		
The Holiday Ramp-Up		
Midyear Reset		
Spring Fever		
Testing Season		
The Home Stretch		

