

## Re-engaging Disconnected Students Online and at School: Focus on Intrinsic Motivation

*Getting students involved in their education programs is more than having them participate; it is connecting students with their education, enabling them to influence and affect the program and, indeed, enabling them to become enwrapped and engrossed in their educational experiences. – Wehmeyer & Sands*

**Before proceeding, take a few moments and think about the following question:**

As the school year begins,  
besides the problem of minimizing the spread of COVID-19,  
***what needs to be done to re-engage disconnected students?***

**E**ngaging students is a constant motivational consideration; re-engaging disconnected students is a major motivational problem. Prior to schools closing, students who were disengaged from instruction were a constant worry, especially with respect to reducing dropout rates. And reports indicate that during the closure a significant proportion of students who had access did not engage productively in remote instruction.

As the school year begins, particular attention must be given to practices that engage and re-engage students. Such practices must be designed to sustain students' involvement in instruction. This is essential to minimizing learning, behavior, emotional problems. It is critical to closing the opportunity and achievement gaps.

### Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation is Fundamental to Promoting Engagement and Wellness

Students who are intrinsically motivated to learn seek out opportunities and challenges and go beyond requirements. In doing so, they behave, perform, and learn more and learn more deeply than do peers who are extrinsically motivated

From a psychological perspective, the essence of the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is the degree to which human behavior is driven by personal needs or reinforcement contingencies (e.g., rewards and punishments). In their delineation of intrinsic motivation, Deci and Ryan emphasize that people strive to meet three fundamental personal needs, namely, to *feel* self-determining, competent, and related to others. Research indicates that these three psychological needs are strongly associated with learning, behavior, and emotional well-being. Studies also indicate that overuse of extrinsics can undermine intrinsic motivation. Dealing with student problems using social control strategies is an example of how often extrinsic motivational practices are overused to the detriment of intrinsic motivation and student engagement. Thus, the following caution:

#### ***Don't overemphasize rewards and punishment!***

All teachers have been taught something about engaging students. Unfortunately, practices for re-engaging students who have become disconnected from instruction rarely are a prominent part of pre- or in-service personnel preparation. And school staff and those at home frequently overrely on rewards and punishment. However, the potency of such strategies generally is short-lived (i.e., they can temporarily get a youngster to do what is demanded but usually are not effective in re-engaging and sustaining students in the instructional agenda).

*Teachers, school support staff, and those at home must learn (a) how to reverse conditions that produce disconnection from instruction and (b) how to re-engage disconnected students.*

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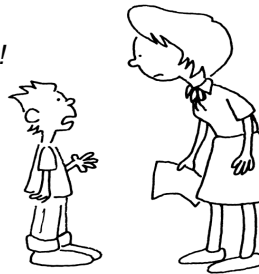
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A student may *proactively* disconnect (e.g., to pursue some preferable, desired activities). Or the disconnection may be *reactive* – a protective form of coping stemming from motivation to avoid and protest against demands in which the student feels unable to perform and/or is coerced to participate (e.g., instruction that is too challenging; instruction that seriously limits options; instructors who are over-controlling). The underlying motivational differences have profound implications for success in re-engaging students.

For some time there has been concern that professional preparation and development and parent education programs have paid too little attention to intrinsic motivation and psychological reactance as related to youngsters' misbehavior. Understanding these concepts clarifies how essential it is to avoid processes that make children and adolescents feel controlled and coerced. Such processes are seen as likely to produce avoidance reactions and, thus, reduce opportunities for positive learning and development of positive attitudes. One result is that students disengage from instruction. Re-engagement involves interventions that help (1) minimize conditions that produce reactance and negatively effect intrinsic motivation and (2) maximize conditions that have a positive intrinsic motivational effect.

### Psychological Reactance

*If you didn't make so many rules,  
there wouldn't be so many for me to break!*



### **Research stresses the need to move away from coercive approaches and increase autonomy-supportive interventions**

A research review by Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci notes that externally controlling contexts overrely on “overtly coercive strategies, such as salient reward contingencies, deadlines, and overtly controlling language.” By way of contrast, personnel in autonomy-supportive school environments “empathize with the learner’s perspective, allow opportunities for self-initiation and choice, provide a meaningful rationale if choice is constrained, refrain from the use of pressures and contingencies to motivate, and provide timely positive feedback.” \*

\*For references to the work of Deci, Ryan, and their colleagues and more on the topic of intrinsic motivation, see the links that can be accessed from the UCLA Center’s Quick Find on *Motivation* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>

Youngsters who are not engaged may have developed extremely negative perceptions of teachers and instruction. In such cases, they are not likely to be open to people and activities that look like "the same old thing." If the youngster is to perceive the situation as a good fit, major changes in approach are required. Minimally, exceptional efforts must be made so the student perceives (1) teachers and other interveners as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (2) content, outcomes, and activity *options* as personally valuable and obtainable. From this perspective, any effort to re-engage disengaged students begins with addressing negative perceptions and then enhancing intrinsic motivation for instruction.

## Options, Decision Making, and Engagement

Reviews of the literature on intrinsic motivation suggest that providing students with options and involving them in decision making are key facets of addressing the problem of engagement in instruction. For example, numerous studies have shown that opportunities to express preferences and make choices lead to greater motivation, academic gains, increases in productivity and on-task behavior, and decreases in reactive negative behaviors. Similarly, researchers report that student participation in goal setting leads to more positive outcomes (e.g., higher commitment to a goal and increased performance).

One difficulty in reversing conditions that produce disconnection is that too few currently available options may be appealing and some may even be eliciting strong avoidance tendencies. The emphasis in engaging and maintaining engagement includes

- expanding the range of curricular and instructional options (content and processes) with an emphasis on enhancing stimulating opportunities that embellish and enrich online and in-school learning
- enabling student personal choice and active decision making
- accommodating a wider range of individual differences to match a student's motivation and capabilities
- not over-using strategies to control and manipulate the student

Given a good range of options, the importance of involving students in decision making cannot be overstated. Individuals who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through. In contrast, those not involved in decision making may manifest little commitment. And if individuals feel coerced, besides not following through they may react with hostility.

In sum, with intrinsic motivation in mind, the aim is to establish conditions for learning that (a) maximize feelings of self-determination, competence, and connectedness with significant others and (b) minimize threats to such feelings. With re-engagement in mind, the process begins with outreach that attracts the attention of disconnected youngsters. This involves creating exciting and novel ways to connect.

### Collaborating with the Community to Connect with Disengaged Students

The focus on re-engaging disconnected students is both a challenge and an opportunity for enhancing school-community collaborations at all levels (neighborhood, district, regional/state, national). Such collaborations are an important element in outreach to connect with disengaged youngsters, and well designed collaborations can bring to online and in-school efforts invaluable resources to enrich instruction and expand student/learning supports. A few examples follow.

#### Outreach by School and Community

*Student/Learning Support Staff* – A guiding principle in planning for the coming year is to revamp and deploy available resources in ways that increase teaming of student/learning support staff with teachers. Teachers cannot and should not be expected to address problems such as re-engaging disconnected students by themselves; student/learning support staff need to play a major role in such efforts. And various community stakeholders and those at home can add to the mix.

*Outreach by Community Stakeholders* – Influential folks and institutions in a community often are in better position to outreach and connect with youngsters who do not respond to school contacts. As a wise colleague shared in a personal communication to our Center at UCLA:

It's hard to see how students who were disconnected in the spring will re-start themselves. My guess is that a sub-set might even be concerned they will get in trouble for not participating in the spring. ... Even if they are in a district where schools are re-opening in a hybrid way, mobile kids won't know when and where to go.

Seems either means need to be found to find these kids – likely through peer networks and social media, as well as direct efforts from student support workers. Or folks need to create a place

for these students to find the school, by creating, somewhere in the community – churches, community centers, or the schools themselves even if they are operating virtual, where students can go to get re-connected and acclimated to school, and just be given support to find their way in how school is now operating. This would then involve some sort of campaign again, likely through social media, to let the students and families know about these places along with some friendly messaging (*we want everyone back; we can help you make it happen*).

### **Harnessing the Excitement and Talents of the Admired**

COVID-19 has brought forth a host of well-known and well-liked folks who offer statements of concern and support. Of particular note are celebrities in the entertainment fields.

Education leaders at every level can reach out to harness the influence and talents of admired individuals who disconnected students may view with positive feelings. Beyond messages of outreach, many of these influential individuals also will be ready to offer their special abilities to create exciting opportunities that embellish and enrich online and in-school learning.

## **About Community Schools**

While every school is located in a neighborhood, relatively few designate themselves as Community Schools. And, those that do vary considerably in the nature and scope of what they mean by the term. For some the term is adopted mainly to indicate a school's commitment to finding better ways to involve families and link with other community stakeholders. Others adopt it to reflect the implementation of family centers, volunteer and mentor programs, school-based health centers, a variety of co-located health and human services, and efforts to extend the school day for learning and recreation. The most comprehensive Community Schools are involved in formal collaborations focused on weaving together a wide range of school and community resources (including the human and social capital in a neighborhood) in order to produce expansive results for children, families, schools, and neighborhoods.

There is a trend to stress efforts to *integrate services* (including the concepts of MTSS – a multi-tiered system of support, wrap around services, and system of care) as a feature of community schools. While integrating services is important, re-engaging disconnected students involves much more than *services*. And focusing so much on *community services* undervalues the role of existing school resources and other human and social capital found in homes and communities and downplays what is needed to effectively address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Student/learning support staff employed by schools and districts have long been marginalized. Now, in planning for the coming school year, the focus is mainly on counselors and nurses because they are seen as meeting specific mental and physical health needs created by the COVID-19 crisis. Other student/learning support staff are almost disappearing from the discussion, especially with the advocacy for Community Schools. The widespread, unproductive competition among school student supports professionals and with community service providers is a continuing consequence of this state of affairs.

From the perspective of re-engaging disconnected students and enhancing equity of opportunity for all students, increasing access to a few more services is only one facet of what is needed. A comprehensive community school also needs to (1) outreach to a wide range of community resources and (2) enhance collaboration with school staff, especially student/learning support personnel. With equity of opportunity as a goal, such collaboration can fill intervention gaps and expand school efforts to unify and develop a comprehensive and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.\*

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\*For free access to online resources related to school-community collaboration, see our Center's Quick Finds on  
>Community Outreach for Involvement and Support <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/commoutreach.htm>  
>Collaboration - School, Community, Interagency; community schools [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1201\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1201_01.htm)

Connecting school, home, and community resources is essential to the well-being of children and youth and to enhancing reducing the opportunity and achievement gaps.

## Personalized Strategies for Re-engagement

Disengaged students can be expected to have well-assimilated negative attitudes and behaviors about schooling that are not easily changed. As we have noted, before such students will re-engage, they have to perceive the learning environment as positively different – and quite a bit so – from the one in which they have come to dislike. This raises the question of how far folks are willing to go to re-engage such youngsters since it usually requires temporarily putting aside standard practices and proceeding with a set of intensely personalized strategies.

Personalized interventions require the capability of entering into a *dialogue* with the youngster. The discussion is a starting point for (a) understanding the motivational underpinnings of the disconnection, (b) formulating a personalized plan for re-connecting the youngster with formal instruction, and (c) continuing to modify the plan when necessary. (The information accumulated from discussions with a number of these students also provides a basis for planning ways to prevent others from disengaging.)

### Dialogue to Establish Personalized Re-engagement Strategies

The focus of the dialogue is on

**Clarifying the youngster's perceptions of the problem** – talking openly about why the student has become disengaged.

**Reframing school learning** – exploring changes that help the youngster (a) view instruction and those involved in facilitating it as supportive (rather than controlling) and (b) perceive content, outcomes and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. Examples include reframing content and processes to convey purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences; enhancing expectations of personal benefits; eliminating threatening evaluative measures .

**Renegotiating involvement in instruction** – developing new and mutual agreements (not unilateral contracts) that will be evolved over time. The intent is to affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options (including valued enrichment opportunities), enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. Arriving at and maintaining an effective mutual agreement involves assisting the student in sampling what is proposed and ensuring provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

**Reestablishing and maintaining an appropriate working relationship** – ensuring that ongoing interactions are designed to create a sense of trust, open communication, and provide personalized support and direction.

## Maintaining Re-engagement and Preventing Recidivism

In addition to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, special attention must be given to maintaining re-engagement and preventing relapses. The emphasis is on

- minimizing threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to valued others
- maximizing such feelings (for those returning to school this involves taking steps to enhance the school and classroom image as welcoming, caring, safe, and just places)

- providing a wide range of potentially interesting options and including students in decision making
- guiding and supporting motivated learning and providing opportunities for continued application and generalization (e.g., ways in which students can pursue additional, self-directed learning or can arrange for additional academic and social supports and guidance)
- ensuring a range of enrichment opportunities
- providing continuous information on learning and performance in ways that highlight accomplishments and strengths
- implementing special assistance as needed.

### ***Here's a Way to Think About Instruction and Intrinsic Motivation***

Positive intrinsic motivation is a *protective factor* and plays a key role in developing *resiliency*. In general, enhancing such motivation involves procedures that can increase positive feelings, thoughts, and coping strategies with respect to learning and minimize experiences that increase avoidance motivation. To these ends, address the following:

***Motivation as a readiness concern.*** Optimal performance and learning require motivational readiness. The absence of such readiness can cause and/or maintain problems. If a student is not motivationally ready, strategies must be pursued to develop such readiness (often including a focus on reducing avoidance motivation). Readiness should not be viewed in the old sense of waiting until an individual is interested. Promoting readiness involves establishing environments that students perceive as caring, supportive places and offering stimulating activities that are valued, challenging, and doable.

***Motivation as a key ongoing process concern.*** Many students get caught up in the novelty of a new activity, but after a few sessions, interest wanes. Some students are motivated by the idea of obtaining a given outcome but may not be motivated to pursue certain processes and so may not pay attention or may try to avoid them. For example, some are motivated initially to work on overcoming their problems but may not maintain that motivation. Strategies must elicit, enhance, and maintain motivation so that a youngster stays mobilized.

***Minimizing negative motivation and avoidance reactions as process and outcome concerns.*** Those working at a school and those at home not only must try to increase intrinsic motivation but also must avoid or at least minimize conditions that decrease motivation or produce negative motivation. This involves, for example, not over-relying on extrinsics to entice and reward because doing so may decrease intrinsic motivation. At times, school is seen as unchallenging, uninteresting, overdemanding, overwhelming, overcontrolling, nonsupportive, or even hostile. When this happens, a student may develop negative attitudes and avoidance about a given situation and over time, about school and all it represents.

***Enhancing intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome concern.*** A critical outcome is to enhance intrinsic motivation for pursuing a given area (e.g., good behavior, reading). Good instruction can develop a positive, intrinsic attitude that mobilizes ongoing learning and positive behaving when a student is not at school. Achieving such an outcome involves use of strategies that do not over-rely on extrinsics and that do enable youngsters to play a meaningful role in making decisions about valued options.

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### **Caution: Hypersensitivity to Student's Emotional Reactions Can Be Harmful**

Concern about disengaged students and their mental health is on the rise. That is good, but caution is warranted.

In whatever form the new school year begins, the number of students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems will be on the up swing. School staff and those caring for youngsters at home are being especially alerted about mental health concerns. The intent is to increase awareness; the danger is that it will produce a hypersensitivity that will have a variety of negative effects. Caution is in order about overpathologizing problems and misinvesting sparse resources.

*Overpathologizing Problems* – Care must be exercised to avoid mislabeling previous commonplace problems and those resulting from the impact of COVID 19 as pathological conditions. The reality is that in many districts (and especially in schools serving low-income families) a large proportion of students have not been doing well for some time.

In this context, it is well to recognize that a long-standing concern for schools is the widespread misuse of the terms ADHD and LD. This includes the problem of nonprofessional applications of these labels, and the reality of the number of misdiagnoses. Remember that at one point in time, almost 50% of those assigned a special education diagnosis were identified as having learning disabilities. This contributed to the backlash to LD seen in the last reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Act. Despite the backlash, the learning disability diagnosis still accounts for the largest number of students in special education.

A similar concern has arisen about the increasing number of students manifesting "garden variety" misbehaviors who are misdiagnosed as ADHD. Reports appear rather regularly that suggest a growing backlash, especially as related to the increasing use of medication to treat these youngsters.

*Universal Screening for Mental Health Concerns* – Related to mislabeling is the debate about universal (first-level) mental health screening of students (e.g., surveys to identify trauma, depression, etc.). As with most such debates, those in favor emphasize benefits (e.g., "Screening lets us identify problems early and can help prevent problems). Those against stress various downsides. Particular concerns are that large scale screening programs can produce many false positives, lead to premature prescription of "deep end" interventions, focus mainly on the role of factors residing in the child and thus collude with tendencies to "blame victims," and so forth. Concerns also arise about parental consent, privacy and confidentiality protections, staff qualifications, involvement of peers, negative consequences of monitoring (especially for students who are false positive identifications), and access and availability of appropriate assistance.

The reality is that teachers and parents readily identify students whose emotional reactions are of concern and those whose learning and behavior require attention. The need in such instances is not so much for screening but for assistance.

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Most students enter kindergarten with a healthy curiosity and a desire to learn to read and write. By the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, the first flood of referrals are generated with respect to learning and behavior problems. From that point on, increasing numbers of students become disengaged from classroom learning, and most of these manifest some related behavioral and emotional problems.

## Concluding Comments

*Many students say that . . .they feel their classes are irrelevant and boring, that they are just passing time . . . (and) are not able to connect what they are being taught with what they feel they need for success in their later life. This disengagement from the learning process is manifested in many ways, one of which is the lack of student responsibility for learning. In many ways the traditional educational structure, one in which teachers "pour knowledge into the vessel" (the student), has placed all responsibility for learning on the teacher, none on the student. Schools present lessons neatly packaged, without acknowledging or accepting the "messiness" of learning-by-doing and through experience and activity. Schools often do not provide students a chance to accept responsibility for learning, as that might actually empower students. Students in many schools have become accustomed to being spoon-fed the material to master tests, and they have lost their enthusiasm for exploration, dialogue, and reflection – all critical steps in the learning process.*

American Youth Policy Forum

The problem of disengaged students is exacerbated by remote learning. As noted in a Hechinger report:

While some students thrived during the coronavirus inspired spring of remote learning, educators, parents and students themselves have reported frighteningly low engagement. Among 20,000 middle and high school students surveyed by Youth Truth, a national nonprofit research organization, just 41 percent of them said they could motivate themselves to do schoolwork while their school buildings were closed. Broken down by grade, 57 percent of fifth graders said they could motivate themselves, and that portion steadily dropped by age with barely one quarter of 12th graders saying the same.

The situation was almost this bad in too many schools even before the pandemic.

Student motivation always is a concern of personnel preparation programs. However, what is taught often is narrowly focused on extrinsic motivators. Generations of school and mental health personnel and parents have been taught about manipulating and controlling behavior using reinforcers. As a result, control strategies continue to dominate how schools and homes react to undesired behavior.

A growing concern is that social control practices produce psychological reactance and decrease intrinsic motivation for engaging in instruction. As a result, such practices can be counterproductive and not effective in generating desired behavior over the long-term. In place of extrinsic controls, schools and homes are being called upon to move toward more autonomy-supportive approaches to re-engage disconnected students and enhance engagement in instruction.

Soon after the school year begins, schools will be inundated with the referral of many students who are not engaged in instruction and are seen as manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And, as in the past, many of these students will join the escalating number of youngsters diagnosed as ADHD, LD, clinically depressed, or some other pathological label. How many have been and will be misdiagnosed is anyone's guess. However, it is highly probable that many are students with commonplace behavior, learning, and emotional problems. Such problems can and should be addressed through other than expensive special education and clinical services that consume resources needed to help prevent and respond immediately after the onset of common problems.

Continuing along this path is untenable. The simplified way MTSS, Community Schools, and mental health in schools are being framed and discussed does not bode well. As usual, much of the burden of addressing complex problems is left mainly to teachers. This has never been a responsible position.

Rather, schools, working with the home and community, need to devote enough of their limited time and sparse resources to transforming student/learning supports into a system that better addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages disconnected students. Given the current depleted state of school resources, the transformation must be accomplished by rethinking and redeploying how existing resources are used. And schools and those at home must take greater advantage of the natural opportunities that occur each day for countering problems and promoting personal and social growth.



\*The matters discussed in this set of practice notes are addressed in depth in the Center's new online resource entitled: *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* (access it from the Center's website by going to [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)).

And for those thinking about developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. We offer free remote TA and coaching – see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/coach.pdf> . The Center's prototype frameworks can be used as blueprints for adapting current policy and practices to unify and weave together available resources and rework the operational infrastructure at schools and districts.

Also note that, two previous books prepared before the pandemic also are free and accessible online:

>*Improving School Improvement* [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)