

## Working with Disengaged Students

(<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/disengagedstudents.pdf>)

**H**ere are four general strategies to think about in planning ways to work with disengaged students:

### **Clarify student perceptions of the problem –**

Talk openly with students about why they have become disengaged so that steps can be planned for how to alter their negative perceptions and prevent others from developing such perceptions.

**Reframe school learning –** In the case of those who have disengaged, major reframing in teaching approaches is required so that these students (a) view the teacher as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (b) perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. It is important, for example, to eliminate threatening evaluative measures; reframe content and processes to clarify purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences and underscore how it all builds on previous learning; and clarify why the procedures are expected to be effective – especially those designed to help correct specific problems.

### **Renegotiate involvement in school learning**

– New and mutual agreements must be developed and evolved over time through conferences with the student and where appropriate including parents. The intent is to affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options, enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. For the process to be most effective, students should be assisted in sampling new processes and content, options should include valued enrichment opportunities, and there must be provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

**Reestablish and maintain appropriate working relationships** (e.g., through creating a sense of trust, open communication, providing support and direction as needed).

To maintain re-engagement and prevent disengagement, the above strategies must be pursued using processes and content that:

- minimize threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to valued others
- maximize such feelings (included here is an emphasis on a school taking steps to enhance public perception that it is a welcoming, caring, safe, and just institution)
- guide motivated practice (e.g., providing opportunities for meaningful applications and clarifying ways to organize practice)
- provide continuous information on learning and performance in ways that highlight accomplishments
- provide opportunities for continued application and generalization (e.g., ways in which students can pursue additional, self-directed learning or can arrange for additional support and direction).

Obviously, it is no easy task to decrease well-assimilated negative attitudes and behaviors. And, the task is likely to become even harder with the escalation toward high-stakes testing policies (no matter how well-intentioned). It also seems obvious that, *for many schools, enhanced achievement test scores will only be feasible when the large number of disengaged students are re-engaged in learning at school.*

All this argues for

- (1) minimizing student disengagement and maximizing re-engagement by moving school culture toward a greater focus on intrinsic motivation and
- (2) minimizing psychological reactance and enhancing perceptions that lead to re-engagement in learning at school by rethinking social control practices.

From a motivational perspective, key facets of accomplishing this involve enhancing learner options and decision making (see Exhibit 1).

## Exhibit 1: Options and Decision Making

If the only decision Maria can make is between reading book A, which she hates, and reading book B, which she loathes, she is more likely to be motivated to avoid making any decision than to be pleased with the opportunity to decide for herself. Even if she chooses one of the books over the other, the motivational effects the teacher wants are unlikely to occur. Thus:

*Choices have to include valued and feasible options.*

David wants to improve his reading, but he just doesn't like the programmed materials the teacher uses. James would rather read about science than the adventure stories his teacher has assigned. Matt will try anything if someone will sit and help him with the work. Thus:

*Options usually are needed for (a) content and outcomes and (b) processes and structure.*

Every teacher knows a classroom program has to have variety. There are important differences among students with regard to the topics and procedures that currently interest and bore them. And for students with learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems, more variety seems necessary.

A greater proportion of individuals with avoidance or low motivation for learning at school are found among those with learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems. For these individuals, few currently available options may be appealing. How much greater the range of options needs to be depends primarily on how strong avoidance tendencies are. In general, however, the initial strategies for working with such students involve

- further expansion of the range of options for learning (if necessary, this includes avoiding established curriculum content and processes)
- primarily emphasizing areas in which the student has made personal and active decisions
- accommodation of a wider range of behavior than usually is tolerated (e.g., a widening of limits on the amount and types of "differences" tolerated)

From a motivational perspective, one of the most basic instructional concerns is the way in which students are involved in making decisions about options. Critically, decision-making processes can lead to perceptions of coercion and control or to perceptions of real choice (e.g., being in control of one's destiny, being self-determining). Such differences in perception can affect whether a student is mobilized to pursue or avoid planned learning activities and outcomes.

People who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through. In contrast, people who are not involved in decisions often have little commitment to what is decided. And if individuals disagree with a decision that affects them, besides not following through they may react with hostility.

Thus, essential to programs focusing on motivation are decision-making processes that affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. Three special points should be noted about decision-making.

- Decisions are based on current perceptions. As perceptions shift, it is necessary to reevaluate decisions and modify them in ways that maintain a mobilized learner.
- Effective and efficient decision making is a basic skill, and one that is as fundamental as the three Rs. Thus, if an individual does not do it well initially, this is not a reason to move away from learner involvement in decision making. Rather, it is an assessment of a need and a reason to use the process not only for motivational purposes, but to improve this basic skill.
- Among students manifesting learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems, it is well to remember that the most fundamental decision some of these individuals have to make is whether they want to participate or not. That is why it may be necessary in specific cases temporarily to put aside established options and standards. As we have stressed, before some students will decide to participate in a proactive way, they have to perceive the learning environment as positively different – and quite a bit so – from the one in which they had so much failure.

Reviews of the literature on human motivation stress that providing students with options and involving them in decision making is an effective way to enhance their engagement in learning and improve their learning and performance. 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 aggressive behavior. Similarly, researchers report that student participation in goal setting leads to more positive outcomes (e.g., higher commitment to a goal and increased performance).

*Simply put, people who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through.*

Conversely, studies indicate that student preferences and involvement tend to diminish when activities are chosen for them.

*That is, people who are not involved in decisions often have little commitment to what is decided.*

Moreover, if individuals disagree with a decision that affects them, besides not following through they may react hostilely. The implications for classrooms of all the research in this area seem evident: Students who are given more say about what goes on related to their learning at school are likely to show higher degrees of engagement and academic success.

*Optimally, this means ensuring that decision-making processes maximize perceptions of having a choice from among personally worthwhile options and attainable outcomes. At the very least, it is necessary to minimize perceptions of having no choice, little value, and probable failure.*

**I KNOW YOU LIKE LUNCH-TIME BEST,  
BUT THERE MUST BE SOMETHING ELSE  
YOU'D LIKE TO DO AT SCHOOL!**

