

Students & Schools: Moving Forward

(March, 2026 Vol. 30 #6) – 40 Years & Counting

Featured

Spring Slump? Engagement is an Even Greater Concern over the Coming Months

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Are you encountering a spring slump?

What's being done to enhance motivation during spring semester?

It's Time for Greater Attention to Engagement and Reengagement

Teachers have long experienced a “Spring Slump” among students. It happens in the weeks before and after a school’s spring break. Productivity slows, and drops in attendance are common. Some students feel worn out; some are bored by the routines at school; some are having academic and personal problems. Approaching summer, the thought of being free of school fills the heads of others. “Senioritis” kicks in for many as high school graduation nears. (“Four years of high school is half a year too long,” says one senior. “I’m already accepted for college,” says another. So they hope to coast through and survive the last few months.)

And as Miriam Plotinsky notes, it’s not just the students: Around this time of year, teachers are particularly prone to burnout, more so than in May or June. After Presidents’ Day hits in the frigid darkness of February, teachers are looking at about a six-week stretch of school until spring break, which doesn’t sound too horrible until we think about some of the other factors. For starters, testing often takes over in the spring months, and that alone adds pressure to the already fast-paced world of instruction. With up-and-down weather patterns, viruses tend to run rampant, and we are still dealing with the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As the school year progresses, an increasing concern is not only on how to enhance engagement, but how to reengage those who have become actively disengaged. Among students, psychological disengagement may be internalized (e.g., boredom, emotional distress) and/or externalized (misbehavior, frequent absences).

This is a good time for school staff to discuss how they understand reduced engagement (energy/motivation/effort) and then plan ways to counter the "slump" through strategies that enhance motivation.

From a motivational perspective, engaging and reengaging students in classroom learning requires increasing ways at school for students to feel

- >self-determining
- >competent, and
- >connected to significant others

And at the same time, they need the school to minimize experiences that threaten such feelings.

All this calls for a greater focus on practices that

- >personalize options and choices,
- >ensure students have a consequential role in decision making,
- >minimize coercive interactions,
- >emphasize real life interests and needs and related enrichment opportunities,
- >provide special assistance (supports/guidance) as needed using a continuum of structure

While a second semester slump may have a small effect on motivated and successful students, there is a sense of mounting frustration for students who aren't doing well (socially, emotionally, academically) that can lead to problems in attendance and effort. For some, it is just that the school year seems so long and their motivation lags. For others, it is clear that they aren't doing well and are unlikely to catch up.

A note about those who have become disengaged: It is unlikely that these youngsters will be open to schooling that looks like "the same old thing." For such students:

- >Major changes in approach are required if they are even to perceive that anything has changed. Minimally, exceptional efforts must be made to have these students
 - (a) view the teacher as supportive and
 - (b) see content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable.
- >New and mutual agreements must be developed and evolved over time through conferences with the student and where appropriate including parents. 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.

What's being done to enhance motivation over the coming months?

Send your comments for sharing to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Thoughts from one colleague:

"I see this very often happening with middle school students, those who have struggled through the grades prior but done well enough to pass or aren't 'failing enough' to identify. These students hit 8th, 9th grade and any compensating skills they have aren't enough to get them through the increased difficulty in curriculum and additional demands. The first [semester] ... of struggling often is met with 'let's wait and see before we evaluate or implement comprehensive RTI strategies'. By the time they hit the second semester they are often so buried/behind in skills that they fall into the 'giving up' mode and the year is lost. ... This is magnified with students who have underlying mental health issues, bringing to the surface anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, depression and the like. Too often it is these students who succumb to typical peer pressures and a negative domino effect comes into play.

In elementary students, they are often seen as 'late developers' and as it becomes apparent in looking to the next grade level they will have challenges meeting with success, how do you catch up when a half the year is gone.

In high school students, with the demands of passing every required exam to be able to obtain a diploma, it can be one exam that keeps them from their goals. How do you motivate a student that has been able to pass up until this point, but can't graduate due to inability to pass a one required exam.

Fundamentally, something has to change to keep the spark of wanting to learn be meaningful and rewarding to students. A meaningful diploma needs to be in place for those whose 'success' is currently measured by being able to pass all regents. There is something to be said for keeping a student engaged learning, knowing and believing there is benefit to learning despite what grade they are able to obtain on an exam.

Keeping parents involved at every grade level is important and sometimes that means creative ways of keeping them involved other than once a year parent conferences. In addition, more earnest efforts in Child Find and RTI need to occur. ... Catching these students earlier in their educational careers

can help prevent issues commonly seen with older students second semester lack of motivation. As well, identifying struggling students and providing supports early in the year in order to be able to provide more intensive services if needed, versus waiting until half the year is over will give a greater opportunity for success.

Keeping kids connected, a hook, so to speak, be it a adult mentor at school, sports, club, etc can help struggling students stay motivated. Kids have to have something to feel positive about going to school, staying the entire day in an environment where you consistently struggle or meet with failure isn't conducive to motivation or a desire to learn.

I am not sure that teachers are given the skills to teach struggling students, especially struggling students with mental health issues. And with budget cuts, many of our teachers are faced doing this without the supports of AIS teachers, Title I support staff, etc. A truly serious look at unfunded mandates needs to occur and alternatives to what almost always seems to occur in times of budget crisis; cuts that most directly affect our students at risk."

For more see Quick Find online clearinghouse resources on *Motivation*

And here are a couple of resources our Center has prepared for discussion and professional development.

>*Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School*

>*Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families*

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Working with communities has taught me that our greatest assets are already here in our communities. When we develop strong partnerships and pair what we know with what communities want to do, we strengthen families and communities and create local solutions that last... Let's seize this moment for the children, families, and the communities we serve. Together we will build a system worthy of their future. – John T. Walkup

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>Quick Links to Online Resources

>>*Building Bridges: Strengthening the Educator-Caregiver Partnership (podcast)*

>>*Understanding Learning Problems vs. Learning Disabilities*

>>*The Impact of School Closures on Equity of Access*

>>*Centering Student Voice in Implementation*

>>*Students Experiencing Stress*

>>*Building better school boards (podcast)*

>>*Disruptive Behavioral Disorders*

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Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness. – Desmond Tutu

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Here's what was discussed in the *Community of Practice* during February
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

Note: *All community of practice editions contain Links to relevant shared resources.*

- >Impact of peers on academic ambitions
- >Improving student/learning supports at rural schools
- >About Crosswell Drive Elementary School (Sumter, SC)
- >How much can a neighborhood impact educational outcomes?
- >About referring students for emotional support
- >Anticipating student protests with a view to their well-being
- >Prevention and more
- >Pursuing "open mic" activities in ways that avoid doing harm
- >Why transform K–12 student/learning supports?

If you missed the resources and news in previous issues of the *Community of Practice*, see
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

>For more resources in general, see our website
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

>For info on the status of upcoming conferences
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upconf.htm>

>For info on webinars
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

>Calls for grant proposals
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upcall.htm>

> Job and training opportunities
when available
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/job.htm>

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All kids need is a little help, a little hope and somebody who believes in them.

Magic Johnson
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Was this assignment due now?

I thought it could wait until my spring slump is over.



National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Our Center emphasizes the opportunity to start now to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

Let Us Know about what ideas are being proposed for moving in new directions for transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.

And if anyone is thinking about increasing the capacity of a district or school with respect to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. Send all info to ltaylor@ucla.edu

>A Few News Stories *(excerpted from various news sources)*

LaSalle Parish Schools becomes first district in Louisiana to move away from homework.

LaSalle Parish Schools is making history in Louisiana, becoming the first school district in the state to move away from homework assignments. District leaders said the decision comes after reviewing research showing homework does not significantly improve academic success and, in some cases, can negatively impact students' attitudes toward learning. The district said success under the new policy will be measured through student engagement, academic performance, attendance, and overall well-being. The no-homework policy will remain in place through the end of the current school year. District leaders say they will review data before deciding whether the change becomes permanent.

District's \$30 million investment to support students is paying off. A lunch time sports program is one of almost 30 initiatives funded by a \$30 million Fresno Unified School District investment in students that was negotiated with the teachers union over two years ago. Teachers gained a say in how the district would provide student support and family services. Nearly \$25 million later, their efforts have resulted in housing assistance for families, additional food pantries, expanded tutoring, buses for students with disabilities, and much more. The programs have provided essential resources, better engaged students, and addressed the socioeconomic, mental health and physical barriers that affect students' ability to learn, educators say. Teachers across the country had been leveraging contract negotiations to gain resources for students and their families through a process known as bargaining for the common good. Funds from the investment also cover senior fees, photos, prom, trips, and events for graduating seniors, ensuring all students have access. Foster youth receive peer tutoring, life skills courses, more scholarships, and post-graduation assistance, including supplies for dorm rooms or apartments as they transition to college.

Texas dyslexic students in special ed surges more than 600%. A massive increase in the number of students with dyslexia within Texas special education programs is one of the stories coming out of the 2025 Texas Education Agency (TEA) annual report. The TEA report showed a 600+ percent increase in the number of dyslexia students in special education classrooms across a six-year period, with just more than 212,000 in the 2024-25 school year. Texas HB 3928 passed in 2023 and made special education now cover dyslexia in the Lone Star State. Districts get funding per dyslexic student in the program, meaning more opportunities for help. That accounts for the astronomical increase of kids in the program. But overall, there's still about 100,000 more kids diagnosed with dyslexia in Texas compared to six years ago.

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Burnout is a term that's immediate, that's visceral. People relate to it. The problem is, people run with it and use it to mean all kinds of things: they use it to mean I'm bored, or I haven't had a good idea all week. – Christina Maslach

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>Comments and sharing from the field

Response to *Layoffs of Student Support Staff in U.S. Public Schools*

1. From a Superintendent: “I appreciate your work and read most of your submissions. This is my first time reaching out. I agree with the substantive nature of this submission, but I would only ask that you consider the overwhelming investment of support service to the detriment of general education offerings. This does not offer a balanced approach to student support by gen eds especially if they are part of the RIF. In addition, in our state, MA, the MTA has pushed student safety [assaults] at the elementary level and the need for 1:1 staffing for students with multiple disabilities. I would be happy to elaborate more as this reply does not build-in the context of where I am coming from and why this impacts all students budgetarily, staffing, resources, and both morally and ethically. With respect and appreciation for your work.”
2. From a school counselor: “It really doesn't help when your admin also diminishes your role so that they can show that you really don't contribute to the school environment. Such as what I am going through. Being told they can hardly justify me being here because my schedule is not full. However, they have minimized my responsibilities because they believe that if they can handle it, they will. Alternatively, after being riffed, you will need to reapply two or three times a week. Really, who can live on that? Not to mention continue to have the self-assurance to carry out your responsibilities, which they are progressively delegating to others. It's a terrifying situation. I would testify in public about the atrocities the administrator inflicts on seasoned workers. only to be informed that I'm being honest with you.”
3. From a director of special education: “Thank you for the information. We are experiencing this same issue and this could be helpful as I'm advocating for changes for next fall.”

Responses to *Facing and Addressing Realities Before More Students Fall Through the Cracks*

1. “Some comments as a 25-year veteran School Counselor – For systemic change, the ability for families to sue school districts for non-negligent reasons needs to change. If students attend public school, families should have to go through a mediation process if there is disagreement. Lawsuits are ruling school districts. Whether making it impossible to properly place a student, discipline a student, or the ability to hold a student accountable. They are also taking away valuable resources to students.
The attendance is flawed. Missing parts of a day is not counted in the equation. We need to be able to move quicker to a SARB meeting with the district office, law enforcement, and a court representative. 10 years ago, it used to be quicker and now all the rules and regulations inhibit the ability to hold families accountable for attendance. I am in a suburban area, so most of my attendance issues are more choice related than barrier related.
Districts should be able to hold money in the fatter years in order to have reserves for the leaner years. This would help stabilize the resources from year to year.
My biggest macro change would be for schools to have the ability to restrict game usage on laptops. I'm not an IT person, but this is the number 1 issue I see. There is severe gaming addiction occurring and despite all of the programs like LanSchool and such, the kids figure out work arounds. Restricting internet access to only the platforms installed on computers by the district should occur.
There are some macro changes that need to be addressed first. Then we could start looking at the micro changes. I appreciate your reads.”

2. “I could not agree more about the crisis of student engagement and it has become a focus of my work. Inspiration is a key pathway. Please see below:
Reinvigorating Classroom Climate: Everyday Strategies to Inspire Teachers and Students
<https://www.routledge.com/Reinvigorating-Classroom-Climate-Everyday-Strategies-to-Inspire-Teachers-and-Students/Elias/p/book/9781041121442>

To Listserv Participants

- **Please share this resource with others.** (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- **Let us know what’s going on** to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 130,000 on our listserv.)
- **For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu**
- **Looking for information?** (We usually can help.)
- **Have a suggestion for improving our efforts?** (We welcome your feedback.)

We look forward to hearing from you!

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF ENEWS

Who Are We? Recently renamed the Center for MH in Schools and Student/Learning Supports, our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor.

For more information about the Center and its many resources, go to the website at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> or email Ltaylor@ucla.edu or adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Send info to share with others or ask for specific resources by email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu