Students & Schools: Moving Forward

Featured

About Waning Student Engagement

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Every teacher wants a room full of motivated students.

Unfortunately, as the school year moves along, it is commonplace to see the positive motivation of some students subside, especially those who have not made a good adjustment to a new school and a new classroom. And of course classroom engagement always is a significant concern related to those experiencing behavior, learning, and emotional problems.

> *This month provides a critical time to focus on increasing ways for the school to maintain and enhance student engagement.*

Student engagement is associated with classrooms that
- emphasize enhancing intrinsic motivation for learning and behaving
- avoid overreliance on extrinsics rewards in pursuing instruction and discipline
- minimize rules and control strategies that produce negative psychological reactions and unwanted behavior

Such classrooms are seen as having supportive teachers and peers, authentic tasks, options that provide opportunities to make significant choices, the type of structure that emphasizes personalized support, guidance, and decision making, and nonthreatening ways to provide information about learning and performance. In effect, the learning experiences (1) promote feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to significant others and (2) minimize threats to such feelings.

> *In general, school staff not only need to try to increase motivation – especially intrinsic motivation – but also must minimize practices that decrease it, such as overrelying on extrinsics to entice and reward.*

Many instructional approaches are effective when a student is motivated to learn what is being taught. But, for students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems, diminished motivation for classroom learning often is a primary concern and calls for a personalized focus on motivation. It is especially important to identify and minimize experiences that maintain or may increase avoidance motivation.

A particular concern is that students experiencing problems at school usually have extremely negative perceptions of and avoidance tendencies toward teachers and activities that look like "the same old thing." Major changes in approach must be made if such students are to reengage with classroom instruction. We find that success with such students often depends on the degree to which the adults at school can reestablish a supportive and personalized working relationship and provide activities the students perceive as personally valuable and achievable.

A core focus of school improvement must be on increasing engagement in learning by enhancing intrinsic motivation

Thinking about Different Motivational Concerns

- **Motivational Readiness**. Optimal performance and learning require motivational readiness. Motivation is a key antecedent condition in any learning situation. Readiness is understood in terms of offering stimulating and supportive environments where learning can be perceived as vivid, valued, and attainable. It is a prerequisite to student attention, involvement, and performance. Poor motivational readiness may be a cause of poor learning and a factor maintaining learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Thus, the need for strategies that can produce a high level of motivational readiness (and reduce avoidance motivation and reactance) so students are mobilized to participate.

- **Motivation as both a process and an outcome concern**. Individuals may value learning something, but may not be motivated to pursue the processes used. Many students are motivated to learn when they first encounter a topic but do not maintain that motivation. Processes must elicit, enhance, and maintain motivation so that students stay mobilized. Programs must be designed to maintain, enhance, and expand intrinsic motivation so that what is learned is not limited to immediate lessons and is applied in the world beyond the schoolhouse door.

- **Countering negative motivation**. Negative motivation and avoidance reactions and any conditions likely to generate them must be circumvented or at least minimized. Of particular concern are activities students perceive as unchallenging, uninteresting, overdemanding, or overwhelming. Most people react against structures that seriously limit their range of options or that are overcontrolling and coercive. Examples of conditions that can have a negative impact on a person's motivation are sparse resources, excessive rules, and a restrictive day-in, day-out emphasis on drill and remediation.

The Center has resources for staff development to improve understanding of motivation and engagement. For example, see:

>Chapter 4 "Enhancing Engagement in Learning at School," Chapter 5 "About Re-engaging Disconnected Students," and Chapter 6 "Managing Behavior at School: Beyond Overrelying on Control Strategies" – In *Improving School Improvement*

>*Intrinsic Motivation: Engaging and Reengaging Students, Families, & Staff* (powerpoint)

>*About Motivation*

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

>*School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate*

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> **If you are working on something that you really care about, you don't have to be pushed. The vision pulls you.** Steve Jobs

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"**When a new intervention or program is introduced, the conventional wisdom among many seasoned educators is, 'This too shall pass.' This attitude doesn't mean an intervention is not promising or educators are not flexible and innovative. Rather, it emerges from a common pattern of ineffective implementation that doesn't sufficiently change adult practices or gain the local support necessary to sustain the changes. The promise of the intervention is never realized, and the district moves on to the "next new thing."**

H. Alix Gallagher, Director of Strategic Partnerships,
Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University

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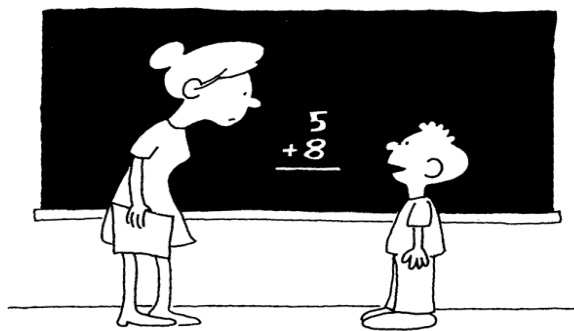
GOSH, MRS. THOMPSON, I WAS READY TO
LEARN MATH YESTERDAY. TODAY I'M READY
TO LEARN TO READ.

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

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

>Steering students toward career & technical education: Concerns about tracking
>Maximizing effectiveness of volunteers in classrooms
>Should schools treat kids as kids?
>School support shows positive outcomes
>Enhancing How Schools Assist Families
>Promoting social capital in youth

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

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**>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**

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**>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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"Not being in school has catastrophic implications for your ability to learn, and we are seeing parents using terminology that implies it's really rooted in a mental health challenge, and sometimes our school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists say, 'No, this is just a kid who needs a lot of support to go to class.'" Kent Pekel

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

Teens are losing interest in school, and say they hear about college 'a lot'. How school-aged members of Gen Z — that's 12- to 18-year-olds — are feeling about school and the future are a little worrying. Just over a third of Gen Z students without college plans believe that "at school, I get to do what I do best every day" — compared to more than half of students with college hopes. Non-college-bound students are also less likely to say they have a teacher who makes them excited about the future or an adult at school who encourages them to pursue their dreams. These are big gaps that affect lots of students, considering only about half of middle- and high-school respondents say they plan to enroll in a 4-year college right out of high school.

Road Safety Plan For The New School Year. Amid a rash of pedestrian deaths, Los Angeles and school officials are detailing how they plan to keep kids safe on their way to school. With the 2024-25 school year underway, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass Wednesday highlighted new safety measures aimed at bolstering road safety around LAUSD campuses. Bass touted the success the city has had in adding hundreds of speed humps and hiring more crossing guards than in previous years. Additionally, Bass' office also recognized the city's Summer Night Lights program, which provides programming for youth and families in public spaces such as parks and recreation facilities to help reduce violence

School choice and a history of segregation collide as one Florida county shutters its rural schools. Tens of thousands of students have left Florida's public schools in recent years amid an explosive expansion in school choice. Now, districts large and small are grappling with the harsh financial realities of empty seats in aging classrooms. As some districts are being forced to close schools, administrators are facing another long-avoided reckoning: how to integrate students in buildings that remain racially and economically segregated. In the Florida panhandle, one tiny district plans to consolidate its last three stand-alone elementary schools into one campus because there aren't enough students to cover the costs of keeping the doors open. The area has been losing students for years as birth rates decline, businesses close and families move to places with more jobs. Other families have stayed but simply left the public schools. The chaos of COVID-19 pushed many families to try homeschooling or microschooling — tiny, private learning environments that often serve multiple families. And now, all Florida students can qualify for taxpayer-funded vouchers worth about $8,000 a year to cover private school tuition, regardless of household income.

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From school safety story above

> "Ensuring our students make it safely to school is one of our most important responsibilities. We are committed to prioritizing making the path is safe — every step of the way." Scott Schmerelson, LAUSD Board of Education

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>Comments and sharing from the field

(1) We received the following from a school board member in response to our commentary about ***How to Embed Mental Health in Schools***

> "What about the growing amount of data supporting the funding for school counselors and behavioral health, which has, in fact, produced no fruits? In fact, it has increased mental instability, lowered grades and increased discipline needs in the classroom. Our role as board members is to put education first! Perhaps the statement to remember is 'the government is not your mother' nor do we want it to be."

And in reaction to the Board Member, we received the following:

> "To blame everything on mental health professionals is ridiculous. The world has become insane and our students' behavior is their solution to that insanity. ... School counselors are imperative to the daily functioning at a school. We don't make the problem worse. Ask any one of my administrators or any of the 440 students I service. If I were part of the problem, I would find a new job. ... The one point to any of this, what is the QUALITY of the service being provided. That includes training, experience and natural ability. Throwing a bunch of interns at a school and calling it a 'comprehensive program' is rubbish."

(2) Response to 9/5/24 email ***While we grieve...***

> "Thank you for your emails and the resources you provide - I always look forward to them! Your most recent email and yesterday's tragedy highlights my frustration of our (the education system) failure to address trauma and antisocial behaviors among our youth, which is the topic of my dissertation. Using Pawson & Tilley's context + mechanism = outcome framework (1997) to identify supports within tier 3 programming, I want to understand what works for who and under what conditions so we can better serve our students who are struggling emotionally and behaviorally, most often due to trauma.
>
>   I strongly feel tier 3 programming for students who are exhibiting internalizing and externalizing behaviors must be required for every middle and high school. Too often students are referred to special education for behavioral or emotional disorders when what they need cannot be properly supported by a special education teacher (I say this with the utmost respect for our specialists). By placing them into a special education class, we further isolate and marginalize these students by telling them they don't belong in general education so we're putting you in a class (or multiple classes) with students with learning disabilities. As a friend of mine and school psychologist says, "trauma is not a disability."
>
>   While we can influence gun control measures, we cannot change the laws, so why are we not doing something across the board within our control? Tier 1 SEL "lessons" are not going to influence or change the social dynamic of our most emotionally and behaviorally vulnerable students - more must be done.
>
>   Beyond speaking with my district, I don't know what to do to change the system so I thought I would lament to you and look for advice. As long as we continue doing what we're doing, we will continue to see these violent behaviors play out. I'm not naive to believe that there is one magic solution but we do know that early identification and intervention does help to build community and reduce risk-taking behaviors - why must there be so many inconsistencies within the educational system that does not guarantee the right support for every student?
>
> Thank you for reading my "soapbox" and keep advocating for change!

(3) Response to 8/22 email 2024-2025 -- *A SEASON FOR CENTER RENEWAL*

>"Thank you. It is always a great read and a reminder to address the root cause of student learning rather than the byproducts."

>"Please continue your impressive work. As an instructor, I have used it with undergraduate and graduate students. As a PD Facilitator, I have used it in numerous presentations throughout the years. Thanks for your contributions to students, teachers & administrators for decades!"

>"Thank you .... It's been "too many" (not really, but we are all getting older) years since we all started our journey in mental health. I would personally like to thank you for everything you have done for the last 30+ years. ... Amazing! Please keep up your great work."

>"Thank you for the materials you send out! As a school social worker in practice for over 17 years, I often find some gems!"

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