

(11/5/25) This continuing education resource is from the national  
**Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA**

### Featured

**(1) Are school policies working against student engagement at school?**

**(2) Accounting for Motivational Differences**

**(3) Call for Nominations: National Award for Work on Transforming Student/Learning Supports**

And, as always, you will find

**(4) Links to more resources**

**This community of practice *Practitioner* is designed for a screen bigger than an Iphone.**

### **For discussion and interchange:**

**>Are school policies working against student engagement at school?**

“If we have failed to progress... I suggest it is not primarily because we have failed to develop more refined methods and ideas, or because we have not coordinated our perspectives into a single model. It is because we have failed to have an impact on school policies that negatively impact motivation, engagement, and self-concepts in so many places across the globe. And while we focus most of our interventions on teachers, they can usually at best provide shelter from the storm, as the supports they can afford students must happen within constraints on their own autonomy. We are far from implementing school cultures that can in a sustained way implement even our best evidence-based theories of student motivation....” Richard Ryan

From: **Comments on Integration, Theory Conflicts, and Practical Implementations: Some Contrarian Ideas for Consideration** (Richard Ryan)

“ Policy makers often have an outcome focus—for example, they place pressure on institutions to achieve performance on standardized test score improvements. In doing so, they drive out the process-oriented orientations needed to optimally develop and engage learners. Attempting to ensure pre-specified outcomes, they mandate inflexible contents, time-lines for delivery, and regular testing, with an implicit theory that these are somehow the pathway to school achievement, where in reality they are the pathways to disengagement for many students and teachers alike. The same is true of unexamined institutional practices like grading, which is pervasive in classrooms everywhere. We can see the drawbacks of grading from the evidence of multiple perspectives, but many teachers find that the use of grades is both normative and required.

The irony then is that these top-down prescriptions and institutional norms are quite often completely out of sync with what most all our theories hold dear—things like respect for and cultivation of student interests and autonomy, the provision of optimally challenging tasks, making learning relevant, the removal of excessive evaluation and threat from learning climates, and the creation of a learning community rather than a comparative or competitive focus. In fact, I argue that the group-level achievement focus of schools crowds out the more important goal of helping all students flourish. Not all students will hit the benchmarks politicians want to see, but all students deserve to have schools that do not harm them, kill their confidence, crush their vitality, or diminish their self-esteem. More positively, they deserve schools that facilitate their development as both learners and citizens. I think it is important for every theorist to wonder how their own framework plays into this dynamic....”

## Center Comments on Student Engagement

Student engagement and classroom management too often are pursued using behavior modification strategies (i.e., extrinsic motivation). This is unfortunate given that the key to addressing student engagement and disengagement in the most productive way involves by drawing on psychological insights into intrinsic motivation.

Understanding intrinsic motivation highlights the importance of avoiding practices that overly restrict student autonomy or make them feel coerced. Relatedly, research emphasizes that overreliance on extrinsic motivation risks undermining efforts to enhance intrinsically motivated engagement and can produce behaviors that interfere with learning. Over time, the result is that too many students disengage from classroom learning.

It is a given that teachers and student support staff are faced with a complex continuum of learner motivation. This fact requires schools to provide a range of ways to enhance engagement. This involves not only engaging and sustaining engagement, but also reengaging students who have disconnected from classroom instruction. If schools were held accountable for engagement alongside academic achievement, it could catalyze stronger support for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that fosters motivation for learning.

We deeply value the work of Ed Deci and Richard Ryan whose work has significantly advanced understanding of intrinsic motivation. Their leadership has help clarify how essential it is to build on and enhance self-determination and avoid processes that undermine it. To introduce the work to a wide range of educators, some time ago we developed the following two brief resources:

>[\*About Intrinsic Motivation from the Perspective of Self-determination Theory\*](#)

>[\*Intrinsic Motivation, Student Engagement, and the Work of Deci and Ryan\*](#)

For those interested in delving deeper into their work, see their book

>[\*Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness.\*](#)

>Deci's 14 minute Youtube presentation: [\*Promoting Motivation and Health\*](#)

>Ryan's hour-long Youtube presentation: [\*Self-Determination Theory & Human Motivation.\*](#)

See the Center Quick Find [\*Motivation, Engagement, Re-engagement\*](#) for more on the topic.

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



### **For discussion and interchange:**

#### **>Accounting for Motivational Differences**

From: **Reimagining support for learning differences**

“...Learner-centered education focuses on each young person’s holistic development through unique learning journeys that emphasize agency, relationships, individualized experiences, community connections and real-world skill development. Instead of existing as isolated programs or practices, the environment integrates these approaches into comprehensive, school-wide systems....

>Educators see challenges as information.... when a student struggles, staff ask, “What is this behavior telling us?”...

>Schools make accommodations invisible. ...

>Students develop genuine expertise. ... students pursue projects that help them develop authentic career experience....

>Students build self-advocacy from day one.... This helps students learn to identify and articulate their needs, with many viewing their learning differences as variations, rather than deficits

>Support extends beyond the school walls and school calendar. The relationships and skills students develop in these environments can lead to year-round opportunities....

When we design educational environments around learners’ needs, rather than trying to get learners to fit in existing systems, everyone benefits....”

### **Center Comments on Accounting for Individual Differences**

Much of the discussion about teaching and supporting students emphasizes individual differences. The familiar adage: *Meet learners where they are* captures the commonsense view of good classroom practice. Unfortunately, this often is interpreted narrowly as a call for matching a student’s current capabilities (e.g., knowledge and skills). The irony is that most school staff know that motivational factors – such as attitudes – play a key role in poor instructional outcomes. One of the most frequent laments about students is: “They could do it, if only they wanted to!”

We all also know that good abilities are more likely to emerge when students are motivated not only to pursue assignments, but also to use what they learn. The point for emphasis is that good classroom practices involve matching motivation – especially intrinsic motivation – and often involves overcoming avoidance motivation.

The desire to “meet learners where they are” is sometimes framed as achieving a good “match” or “fit.” Schools strive to design instruction that fits, but the reality is that they can only approximate an optimal fit. And, a close approximation probably requires personalizing instruction.

*Defining Personalization.* Efforts to improve instructional fit in the classroom have long revolved around the concepts of individualized or personalized instruction. The two concepts overlap in their emphasis on developmental differences. That is, most individualized approaches stress individual differences in developmental capability. Personalization, however, is defined as the process of accounting for individual differences in both capability and motivation. Personalizing instruction means ensuring conditions for learning experienced by the learner as good ways to attain goals the student wants to reach. This has fundamental implications for all efforts to ensure student success.

Personalization needs to be understood as a psychological construct. From a motivational perspective, the learner’s perception is a critical factor in defining whether the environment is a good fit. Given this, it is important to ensure learning opportunities are perceived by learners as good ways to reach their goals. A basic assessment concern, then, is eliciting learners’ perceptions of how well what is offered matches both their interests and abilities.

For more on personalizing learning, see Chapter 7. “Understanding Personalized Instruction” in **Improving School Improvement**.

## **Call for Nominations:**

### **National Award for Work on Transforming Student/Learning Supports**

The National Center for Mental Health in Schools & Student/Learning Supports is pleased to call for nominations for its award to a school making significant strides in rethinking and restructuring student/learning supports to better address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

#### **Award Details:**

- Recognition: National acknowledgment of your school's accomplishments
- Award Amount: \$1,000 to support your efforts to share your trailblazing efforts with others

**Nomination Deadline:** December 1, 2025

#### **How to Submit:**

We welcome both nominations and self-nominations. Please include a brief description of the work accomplished to date and send submissions to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

#### **More Information:**

Visit the Center's website for details about transforming student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>.

## **>Links to a few other relevant shared resources**

- >> **Parents' Perspectives of Culturally Responsive Practices for Teachers and School Administrators**
- >> **Capturing the Prevalence, Patterns, and Predictors of Supportive Relationships in Early Adolescence**
- >> **How Educators Can Prevent Student Radicalization**
- >> **Building Resilience & Confronting Risk: A Parents & Caregivers Guide To Online Radicalization**
- >> **Building a Bridge: Why Engaging Young People in Politics Matters**
- >> **What Is Neurodiversity?**
- >> **What Makes Some CTE Programs Great While Others Fall Short?**
- >> **Harness parent power to boost literacy gains**

Someone suggested that more students would want to engage and learn at school if going to school was illegal.

### **A Few Upcoming Webinars**

***For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center's Links to Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts***

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

11/5 Evaluation of mental health in IEP  
11/5 AI, inequity and imagination: student centered learning  
11/12 Addressing suspensions and early dismissal for students with disabilities  
11/13 Career exploration for young learners  
11/13 How schools are navigating AI advances  
11/13 School leaders supporting instruction  
11/13 Support for homeless youth  
11/13 Principals supporting teachers in classroom instruction  
11/13 The power of protective factors in social development  
11/6 Fostering resilience, growth, and positive outcomes  
12/2 Reducing risk for youth substance misuse  
12/10 Strategic planning for education leaders  
1/15/26 Elevating school staff talent and recruiting

***How Learning Happens*** (Edutopia's series of videos explores guiding all students, regardless of their developmental starting points, to become engaged learners).

***Unpacking the Impacts of Structural Racism on Youth*** (Webinar recording)

### ***National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports***

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

***RELEASED for 2025-2026***

***An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports:  
A Month-by-Month Guide for Systemic Change with Existing Resources***

***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](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

**Findings from a recent Gallup and Walton Family Foundation indicate that a majority of teachers report the need for student/learning supports.**

<https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/teachers-are-more-satisfied-when-they-have-the-right-tools-gallup-survey-finds>

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### ***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 140,000 on our listserv.)

**For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto: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! Contact: [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

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**THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!**

For new sign-ups – email [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

**Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.**

**THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF THE PRACTITIONER**

Who Are We? 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.