Motivation Matters: 40% of High School Students Chronically Disengaged From School

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It's unsurprising that many students are perceived as unmotivated, suggests a series of papers released by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at the George Washington University. Based on a review of research from various sources going back decades, the papers suggest that while existing efforts to increase student achievement are an important part of education reform, they have not focused enough on what it takes to motivate students in school.

Too often, strategies that adults use to boost student achievement — such as raising academic standards and giving high-stakes standardized exams — do not address the real reasons why students are disengaged. Even the most dedicated teachers and parents may be sending messages that leave children believing they don't have what it takes to succeed.

Lack of motivation is a real and pressing problem. Upwards of 40 percent of high school students are chronically disengaged from school, according to a 2003 National Research Council report on motivation.

Students who are bored or inattentive or who put little effort to schoolwork are unlikely to benefit from better standards, curriculum, and instruction unless schools, teachers, and parents take steps to address their lack of motivation, the CEP papers conclude.

On the other hand, students who are motivated to learn have higher achievement, show better understanding of the concepts they are taught, are more satisfied with school, and have lower dropout rates, according to a variety of studies reviewed by Edward Deci and colleagues.

The CEP summary paper not only makes it clear that more attention must be paid to student motivation, it also provides research-based starting points for action.

As with any skill, motivation can be encouraged — or discouraged — in children from an early age by the actions of important people in their lives. Studies suggest that students are more academically motivated when one of four conditions is present: when they feel competent enough to complete the task at hand; when they see a direct link between their actions and an outcome and have some control over whether or how to undertake a task; when the task has interest or value to them; and when completing the task brings social rewards, such as a sense of belonging to a group or approval from someone they care about. I've seen this first-hand in my work coaching debate to at-risk young men in the South Bronx. Efforts to engage students work best when they tap into at least one of these conditions; and the more of these conditions that are met, the greater the motivation.

While no single strategy can motivate all students who are disengaged from school, research reviewed by CEP points to strategies that schools, teachers, families, and communities can use to help spark student motivation.

For example, school programs that reward students with money, prizes, or privileges for academic accomplishments or effort are more effective if they reward students for mastering a certain skill, such as reading a book or solving a problem. They are less successful motivators if they reward students for reaching a certain level of performance, such as achieving a passing score on a test, according to research by Roland Fryer. Rewarding actions that students can control, Fryer notes, such as completing homework, yields better results than rewarding accomplishments that seem beyond students' reach or out of their control, such as whether they earn an A grade.

Moreover, school programs that try to motivate students by focusing on the goal of attending college or paying for their college tuition are more motivating *if* they immerse students in a "college-going culture" rather than just encouraging them to aspire to college and promising scholarships for tuition. This immersion approach includes providing academic, social and other supports, making clear why college was important, and outlining a path to get there.

School programs that integrate community service with academics can also ignite students' interest and motivate them to work harder. But research notes that to be effective, these programs should be aligned with the school's curriculum and academic standards, encourage students to reflect on what they are learning, and connect curriculum to community problems.

The bottom line to the report is that policy discussions right now focus more on how to test students, what they should learn, how to make their schools better, and how to evaluate and improve teachers, instead of on the single biggest determiner of academic success: student motivation.