

EDUCATION WEEK

## SPOTLIGHT

## On Motivation

*Editor's Note:* Sometimes, the difference between success and failure in class and on assessments boils down to student motivation. Read on to learn about innovative ways of reaching and inspiring students to study harder and take learning further.

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# Building a Culture Aimed at College

Urban high schools take on a complex mission.

By Catherine Gewertz  
*Baltimore*

**M**avis Jackson is trolling the polished hallway floors in her sensible shoes. As the college counselor at a small, high-poverty high school, she has much to do if she is going to get all these students into college. So she milks every moment.

"Are you registered for the SAT?" Jackson calls out to one young man between class periods, pointing at him for emphasis. "You need to sign up for the college tours," she tells a young woman in a classroom down the hall.

**Expert Guidance:** Junior Valerie Oliver, 16, registers for the SAT at Vivien T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy in Baltimore with the help of Mavis Jackson, right, a CollegeBound counselor.





Christopher Powers/Education Week

**EXPLORING OPTIONS:**  
**Students from W.E.B. DuBois and Reginald F. Lewis high schools in Baltimore attend a college and career fair set up by the CollegeBound Foundation, which works to increase college-going rates.**

As the national drumbeat for college readiness grows louder, policymakers and scholars trumpet the potent role that a school's "college-going culture" can play in leading more students to choose postsecondary education. But it's places like this hard-luck corner of urban America that have miles to go if all students are to have a shot at further learning after high school.

Here's what the work of building a college-going culture looks like on the ground: It's Jackson "talking college" with freshmen practically the minute they arrive here at Baltimore's Vivien T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy. "It's about putting the fire in their bellies, the idea in their heads," she says.

It's a guidance counselor helping to make sure students sign up for the SAT, and advisory teachers supporting the college-planning process in their classes. It's the school registrar making sure all i's are dotted and t's are crossed as seniors' transcripts go to colleges. It's a principal who drives the college vision around the clock. It's letters of college acceptance pasted up in the hallways, teachers wearing T-shirts from their alma maters, students overhearing snippets of classmates' college plans as the class bell rings.

One recent week, Jackson sat down with se-

niors one at a time to review their financial-aid-award letters and figure out whether they needed to ask colleges for more money. She visited two English classes to talk with juniors about the college fairs they had attended, and kick-starts their thinking about the college essays they would begin writing in class the next week. She planned financial-aid workshops for parents, and showed juniors how to search for scholarships.

### Breathing the Air

The point is to make a college-going culture like air: something students are immersed in, something they're breathing, so that postsecondary education becomes an inevitable ticket to a better future.

"It's a mentality, that every day they are hearing about and thinking about what happens after high school, that 'I am going to college,'" says Starletta Jackson, the founding principal of the 5-year-old Vivien T. Thomas Academy.

That air permeates more-advantaged homes where adults have some higher education, so those children breathe it from an early age. But those are not the homes most Vivien T. Thomas students come from. So the need to nurture a presumption of college in such schools is even

greater, especially because most guidance counselors are stretched too thin to provide the kind of intensive college help that disadvantaged students need.

That's where the CollegeBound Foundation comes in. Like hundreds of similar programs that have cropped up nationwide in recent years, the 21-year-old Baltimore-based group sends college advisers into schools to boost college consciousness and college-going rates.

Principals at 28 of the city's 34 regular public high schools have invited the foundation to set up shop, agreeing to pay \$54,000 to cover the salary and benefits of a "specialist" such as Mavis Jackson to work on-site full time. (Guidance counselors typically cost a school about \$80,000, foundation officials said.) CollegeBound foots the bill for the rest of the program's services, which include college fairs, local and overnight college trips, a 13-module college-advising curriculum, and a project that tracks and supports some CollegeBound-advised students into college.

The program also supports fee waivers for college applications and entrance exams, and provides scholarships and grants to help Baltimore students attend college. In 2007-08, it gave \$800,000 in grants and scholarships to 528 students.

The foundation recently began a "FAFSA blitz" program, which pairs students with experts to help in filling out the complicated Free Application for Federal Student Aid form. Research has shown that completing the form can be a big stumbling block in the college-application process. In 2007, 488 CollegeBound students in Baltimore schools completed the FAFSA; after the 2008 blitz, 1,421 had done so. By the end of the 2009 blitz, the number of annual FAFSA completions was up to 2,007.

Starletta Jackson, the principal, who is no relation to Mavis Jackson, says her two guidance counselors had their hands full last year trying to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of the school's 400 students, so they had virtually no time for college advising.

"I don't think people realize how much hand-holding is involved in good college counseling for our kids," she says.

David Hawkins, the director of public policy and research for the National Association for College Admission Counseling, based in Arlington, Va., says college advising often is forced onto a low rung on the priority ladder. It falls below guidance counselors' more pressing duties, such as dropout prevention, especially since their caseloads—averaging 300 students per counselor—are so high. Their capacity to provide college guidance is also hindered by a lack of required training in that area in graduate school, he says, and

a paucity of professional-development opportunities once they are on the job.

"Because school capacity in counseling is so strained by limited budgets and staff, what happens in public schools is a bit of educational triage," Hawkins says. "So outside college-access groups have been filling the void."

## Outside Help

Craig E. Spilman, a longtime Baltimore middle school principal who is now the executive director of the CollegeBound Foundation, says his specialists sometimes encounter resentment from schools' guidance counselors, who can be wary of outsiders' sharing some of their job duties. But the specialists try hard to take a collaborative approach to their work with a school's staff, he says, because they believe that students need to hear the college message from as many adults as possible.

"There is a hidden danger in thinking this work can be carried by one person," Spilman says. "Everyone has to have high expectations for every child. We need everyone in the building to believe that, and take action to make it happen."

The CollegeBound program has the ardent support of Andrés Alonso, who has been the chief executive officer of the 82,000-student Baltimore district since 2007. He has made high school improvement a top priority, sparked in part by unsettling statistics like this: Only 7 percent of the district's June 2001 graduates—a figure that excludes those who never completed high school—had earned a college degree five years later.

Alonso praises CollegeBound for offering a cost-effective way to provide full-fledged college-counseling services in schools that would be unlikely to be able to do so otherwise.

"We are an urban school system putting an enormous amount of resources into preventing violence in schools, building community supports, building after-school programs, building supports to help our kids stay in school," he says. "By definition, it almost overwhelms our ability to do certain other things. So [the program is] filling an important niche in these schools."

In addition, by assembling and analyzing data about students' college readiness and sharing it with principals, the foundation has helped school leaders get a clearer picture of what they can do to better equip their students for postsecondary education, Alonso says.

Data suggest that CollegeBound's work could be helping strengthen key parts of the college-going formula for city students.

In 2002-03, 1,373 students in CollegeBound schools completed one or more college applications. During the 2008-09 year, 2,433 students

had done so, as of March. Of the Baltimore high school seniors in the classes of 2007 and 2008 who received CollegeBound counseling, 79 percent were accepted into two- or four-year colleges, up from 47 percent in the class of 2005, according to CollegeBound data.

Districtwide, the number of high school students taking the SAT has risen 70 percent in the past 10 years, compared with 37 percent in Maryland overall and 29 percent nationally, according to district figures.

A program run by the foundation with a subset of CollegeBound students seems to be yielding promising signs, meanwhile, of better college retention.

About 180 students who received CollegeBound services in three successive recent graduating classes went on to college and were tracked by CollegeBound staff members who stayed in touch and offered support. An ongoing study of that group found that more than 90 percent completed their freshman year and went on to sophomore year, compared with fewer than 70 percent of their non-CollegeBound peers nationally, according to the foundation.

This is the first year of CollegeBound at Vivien T. Thomas Academy, so it is too soon to gauge the program's impact on rates of college enrollment, persistence, or completion. But after one year, college applications are up: The class of 2009 submitted 271 applications, compared to 181 in last year's class. And students say they feel supported in what would otherwise have felt like an overwhelming college- and financial-aid application process.

Sherrilli Carter, an 18-year-old who is bound for nearby Towson University in the fall, says Mavis Jackson's financial-aid guidance helped her see college as a real possibility, not just a dream.

"I wanted to go, but I worried a lot where I would get the money," Carter says.

For Antione Tomlin, a 16-year-old junior, the CollegeBound specialist helped motivate him because she and her "college" messages seemed to find him everywhere. Jackson was on the morning announcements about college fairs. Calling him to make sure he met deadlines for SAT registration. Asking him all the time what colleges he thought about going to. She got him an internship at a local hospital that helped him clearly see several career pathways.

Inspired, he turned his mediocre 8th and 9th grade record into a 91 percent average and the presidency of the student body this year in an attempt to expand his college options.

"I'll be the first one in my family to finish high school or go to college," Tomlin says with a big smile.

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# Authors Share Tips on Getting Boys to Read

Humor, war, and even emotion, if handled the right way, can all lure boys into a good book, writers advise teachers

## Boys

Some teachers find that they encounter more boys than girls who are reluctant readers.



### Popular Books Among Boys

*Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* by Jack Gantos

*Robot Zot* by Jon Scieszka and David Shannon

*Under a War-Torn Sky* by L.M. Elliott

By Mary Ann Zehr  
Winchester, Va.

Boys like to read books about trucks, boys who get into trouble, sports, animals, and war. More than girls, they lean toward nonfiction. And don't forget the humor or action in stories.

Those are some of the insights that well-acclaimed children's authors and illustrators—most of them men—conveyed to about 300 teachers and librarians—most of them women—at a recent conference here. Hosted by Shenandoah University, the meeting focused on how to get boys hooked on reading.

At the same time, a couple of authors and an illustrator stressed that boys are drawn as well to books with a strong emotional quality.

For an illustration in a book to be effective, "there has to be some emotional appeal," said Jerry Pinkney, who is known for illustrations that show a strong connection between people and animals. "What's important in my work is not just the action, but what's around the action," the artist said, showing the audience one of his illustrations from the picture book, *Black Cowboy, Wild Horses*, in which a cowboy is feeding his horse an apple.

Mr. Pinkney explained that he created a feeling of intimacy in the scene by having the cowboy give his horse the apple after he's taken the time to remove the bridle and reins.

Boys, said Jack Gantos, who writes books about bad boys, "like the emotional stuff as much as the physical stuff." The author of the *Rotten Ralph* and *Joey Pigza* series says that half the content in his books is about what happens on the outside of the character, including lots of action, and half is about what happens inside the character. A theme in his

## Girls

For more than three decades, girls have outperformed boys on standardized reading tests.



### Books Appealing to Girls

*Freshwater Road* by Denise Nicholas

*Reaching for Sun* by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer

*Remember: The Journey to School Integration* by Toni Morrison

books is that the characters are loved unconditionally, even if they mess up a lot, which he said is something that children can identify with.

Mr. Gantos' books are popular among boys. When children read about characters with feelings, he said, it helps them recognize the feelings they have themselves."

Not all authors who attract the interest of young male readers are men, though the boys may not be aware of that.

Laura Malone Elliott, an author who spoke at the June 29-July 3 conference, has reached a lot of male readers with her book *Under a War-Torn Sky*, a fictionalized account of a boy flying a B-24 in World War II. The story is based on her father's experiences in the war.

Ms. Elliott followed her editor's suggestion to use only her first initials, L.M., rather than her first name "Laura," on the book cover to keep boys and their parents from detecting

that she was a woman and possibly deciding not to buy the book for that reason.

Boys seem to like Henry, the central character in the story, Ms. Elliott speculated, because he's not a typical hero. "He's an average, ordinary farm boy who is surprised by everything that happens."

"Boys," Ms. Elliott said, "want the gore, the smell, the bugs. But they are vulnerable. Boys in war are afraid. If you are a writer and are going to write about war, you need to be responsible and write about how they cried and were scared," she added.

### Gap in NAEP Scores

Karen Huff, an education professor at Shenandoah University and the conference organizer, referred to the gender gap in reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress as a rationale for the conference theme on how to get boys to read.

Nine-year-old girls score 7 points higher than boys of the same age in reading, according to long-term trend data for NAEP. For 13-year-olds, the gender gap is 8 points. For 17-year-olds, the gender gap is even wider, 11 points, and has remained about the same since 1971, when the test was first given. In 1971, 17-year-old girls scored 12 points higher than boys that age in reading on NAEP.

University officials attest to those deficiencies sticking to many young men as they age. "Overall, our female students coming in [to the university] are better readers [than male students]," Tracy Fitzsimmons, the president of the university, told conference attendees. "They are better writers."

Children's book author Jon Scieszka, who wrote *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* and *Knucklehead* and is about to come out with a picture book, *Robot Zot!*, gave teachers suggestions on how to engage boys more in reading. He laced his talk with stories and jokes about his own children, a boy and a girl, who are now adults.

"My son will never read another book by Toni Morrison," he noted, explaining that his son had been assigned to read one of that best-selling author's books in high school and hated it. "When was the last time a funny book was assigned in reading?" he asked.

Mr. Scieszka urged teachers to look at their classroom libraries and make sure they contain books that boys like. "Boys enjoy things like nonfiction, comics, graphic novels, and texts they are interested in," he said.

He encouraged female teachers to "find some guys" who might be able to be role models for boys in reading. The author half-joked that when boys don't have reading role models who are male, they may worry that they'll turn into girls if they show too much interest in reading.

Mr. Scieszka, who once was a 2nd grade teacher, runs the Guys Read Web site that provides "Guys' Picks," a list of recommended books. He suggested that teachers use a low-key approach in recommending books to boys. They might say, "Another guy read this book and liked it." He observed that it's easier for boys to navigate a small selection of books than a really large selection.

In addition, Mr. Scieszka said, teachers should embrace technology in the classroom because boys are drawn to technology and that may be another way to get them reading.

Matthew Brodie, a librarian for Lowes Island Elementary School in Sterling, Va., and one of the few men at the conference who wasn't a presenter, said he wishes he had had a male teacher like Mr. Scieszka who was energetic and funny. "He seems to be like a larger version of what you have in an elementary classroom. Just a 3rd grader who is grown up and still acts like a 3rd grader," he said.

### Stretching Outside Gender

Mr. Brodie said he signed up for the conference because he has a "strong interest in reaching out to boys" and wanted to meet some of the authors of children's books he admires. He said he believes female teachers and librarians need to stretch to take note of boys' interests in the same way he has to stretch to notice girls' interests, such as by buying books about fairies for his school library.

"For women to reach out to boys, they have to show an interest in what boys like," he said. Even if they don't watch the Washington Redskins, for instance, they can keep track of whether the pro football team won or lost its most recent game and talk with boys about it, he said.

Janet Pankau, the mother of four boys and a 3rd grade teacher at Rolling Ridge Elementary School in Sterling, Va., said she came to the conference scouting for books that might interest her male students. She was happy to learn, for example, about a series of sports fiction, including *Touchdown Trouble* and *Winners Take All*, written by Fred Bowen, who gave a presentation here.

Finding books that boys will like is somewhat like shopping for clothes that boys will wear, she said. "There are 10 times more for girls than boys."

Students in Ms. Pankau's class participate in independent reading a half hour daily.

If boys can't find a book that interests them, they "fake reading," she said. "They'll sit there during silent reading time and turn the pages," she said, "but you don't know if they are reading."

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# Getting Girls Into Games

By Katie Ash

To increase the number of girls involved in digital game building and design, as well as to open the door to science, technology, math, and engineering careers—where females have historically lagged behind their male counterparts—researchers have begun to unpack just what aspects of gaming engage girls.

And they are beginning to figure out how programs that put girls in the driver's seat of game creation influence their relationships with technology and other STEM subjects.

"Ten years ago, you had virtually an absence of women across the board [in the gaming community], and now the picture is a much more different shade," says Yasmin B. Kafai, a professor at the Philadelphia-based University of Pennsylvania's graduate school of education and a researcher of games and gender. "You do have these pockets of women who are very strong and active."

Yet even though more women and girls are playing games, few are actually creating and designing them, says Jill Denner, a senior research associate for the Scotts Valley, Calif.-based ETR Associates, a nonprofit organization that aims to promote health and education in various communities.

"There are some more women and girls involved in creating games, but it's a drop in the bucket. It's still a field that's dominated by men in terms of the

professional gaming community," she says. "At the K-12 level, when you run computer-game classes, it's still the boys that see themselves as a good fit. The girls still continue to not see that as a domain in which they fit."

To help bridge the gap between girls who play games and girls who build them, Denner heads the Girl Game Company, an after-school program at the 19,000-student Pajaro Valley Unified School District, south of San Francisco, where middle school girls gather twice a week to simulate a game company. The program is funded by a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation.

"It's built around the idea that they are a company, building games for clients, and the girls take different roles in the company," everything from game designer and creator to human resources manager, Denner says.

## Middle School Is Key

About a third of the students who enter the program have a strong interest in computer programming and game design and identify a computer-related career path for themselves, says Denner, while the others often enroll in the program for social reasons and are less likely to see themselves in a tech-related career.

"[Middle school] is a critical period for identity formation, so catching them while they're making decisions about classes and careers, and who they are, is important, especially for catching people who aren't going to naturally choose that path," she says.

Carl Pennypacker, an astrophysicist at the University of California, Berkeley and the principal investigator for the Hands On University project, has created an after-school program called the Universe Quest Game that works with middle school-aged girls on game creation.

Girls in that project work together to do tasks within the game's platform by building characters

and inserting puzzles, all of which revolve around astronomy. The project has also teamed up with a group of students in Nairobi, Kenya, and through the Web-based voice application Skype girls from different parts of the world can work together, share their expertise, and show off the games they make.

“It’s a way for [the students] to be creative and have an end product that they can show and share with kids all around the world,” says Pennypacker. “The kids really love to create games. It’s a huge untapped resource.”

He hopes the program, made possible by a three-year, \$1.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation, helps open the door for girls into science, math, and technology careers.

### ‘A Worthwhile Purpose’

One reason why girls have begun to have a larger presence in the gaming community is because the way that video and computer games are marketed and developed has shifted, experts say.

“What has changed really enormously is that both the people who make the game platforms and the people who produce the games for them are increasingly interested in both girls and women,” says Maria Klawe, the president of Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, Calif. Originally, video games were marketed primarily to boys and men, but as their popularity has grown and the market has become more saturated, the video game industry has begun to expand its reach, says Klawe.

Klawe, who has conducted research on gender and gaming for more than a decade, says that although girls and boys both enjoy playing games, girls generally interact with games differently and are attracted to different aspects of gaming than boys are—although when referring to gender, there are always exceptions.

“One of the things we’ve found in our early study is that girls are more likely to do something with a computer game or video game if they think it has a worthwhile purpose,” she says.

Generally, girls also engage in game play for more social reasons than boys, says Klawe. “With girls, it’s much more a question of finding a game that’s fun to play with your friends.”

Another big difference between what appeals to females versus males is violence, says Carrie Heeter, a professor and a principal investigator for the Games, Entertainment, and Learning Lab at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

“Many of today’s genres [of video games] involve fighting, shooting, and attacking,” she says. “That is probably the biggest difference in content preferences, is that males are much more interested in games that include violence. In general, that’s more of a turnoff for females.”

Part of the reason it has taken longer to develop

games that appeal to girls, says Cornelia Brunner, the deputy director of the Center for Children and Technology at the Newton, Mass.-based Education Development Center, is because female players enjoy games with lots of interaction between characters and their environment, which “requires a much more sophisticated technology, more sophisticated algorithms,” she says. “It’s only in recent years that the technology itself has made it possible for us to create those kinds of games.”

### ‘Context and Story’

Her Interactive Inc., a Bellevue, Wash.-based game-development company, has been making computer games for girls since 1993. Their most famous series is the Nancy Drew adventure games, says Amy McPoland, the vice president of marketing for the company.

“We try to make games for girls that are empowering and that cater to what girls are looking for,” she says. The Nancy Drew games, each of which is based loosely on the book series, are appealing, in large part, because the lead character becomes “an independent, strong role model for girls, which allows us to tell a great story,” says McPoland.

The company also has message boards set up for girls to share tips with one another, says McPoland, which is another feature of the game play that attracts girls.

Girls also tend to like strong story lines, says Karen Peterson, the executive director of the Lynwood, Wash.-based Puget Sound Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, a nonprofit organization that aims to increase diversity in STEM subjects.

“You really have to have context and story,” says Peterson. “For me, that’s the message that we need to get out there to people who are developing curriculum and games [for girls.]”

And although more games are being created with girls in mind, there is still progress to be made, says Peterson. “The gaming industry understands that they need to attract girls and women,” she says. “Games and the virtual world can be a really great hook for getting girls excited about STEM careers.”



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# Motivating Students in the Middle Years

A decade after a national group formed to put more rigor into middle schools, educators are still searching for the right blend of academic and developmental strategies.

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo  
*Durham, N.C.*

It's not easy to hide in Amber Cline's math class.

Even the most skilled evaders among the 7th graders at Rogers-Herr Middle School here can't dodge the veteran teacher's questioning and prodding during a lesson on scale factors and ratios.

The earnest teacher has learned just how hard to push to keep her students focused on the illustrated math problems they are working on, and when to ease up if one gets frustrated or seems close to turning her off. She's honed that instinct throughout the school year as she's gotten to know each of her students' academic strengths and weaknesses, as well as their personalities, moods, and quirks.

"For the kids who aren't self-motivated and don't have support at home, we need to stand over them and say get this done," Ms. Cline said. "We know what each kid needs as far as applying pressure or giving support. ... They know we will not allow them to fail."

Ms. Cline and her colleagues in this school have worked at melding rigorous subject matter with the demands of test-driven accountability, while also attending to the developmental, family, and social issues their 625 predominantly minority and lower-income students face.

More than a decade after a prominent group of middle-grades reformers set out to infuse higher academic standards into what critics deemed the touchy-feely world of middle schools, many teachers are still grappling with ways to motivate students to excel in-

tellectually while helping them adapt to the dramatic physical and emotional changes that come with puberty.

That mix of rigor, relevance, and responsiveness, experts say, is crucial for guiding students, particularly those most at risk of dropping out, on the path to high school graduation and later success. Too many schools serving 6th through 9th graders, however, have yet to find the right prescription for keeping those youngsters engaged at a time when their growing curiosity, independence, and need for the acceptance of their peers may lead them to act out or zone out in school.

"Our belief is they'll grow out of it. But the evidence shows that in high-poverty environments, they don't grow out of it" without intervention, said Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Center for the Social Organization of Schools, based at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. "As soon as kids are off track, we need to aggressively approach these issues."

In his studies on dropouts in large urban districts, Mr. Balfanz has found that tracking several classroom indicators for individual students and addressing problems in those areas early can prevent later troubles. Attendance rates, behavior, and grades, he concludes, are far more accurate predictors of who will graduate or drop out than test scores, race, or socioeconomic status.

About 40 percent of eventual dropouts could be identified in the 6th grade, he estimates. "The only way to intervene is if we know who the kids are," he said, and are fa-

miliar with their records in school.

Mr. Balfanz and his colleagues, like several researchers before them, contend that many students begin to go astray well before they reach high school. Middle schools, he believes, should be the first line of defense in tracking those warning signs and intervening.

"Some kids do OK in middle school, and it's the transition to high school that will get them in trouble," he said. Programs designed to support 9th graders with the transition, however, may not address the difficulties of those students who Mr. Balfanz says are already on their way to becoming dropout statistics.

"Now we can show that for a significant segment of kids, 9th grade doesn't throw them off track," he added, "it finishes them."

By many indications, middle schools are not heeding that message. Researchers and policymakers have pointed to the poor performance of 8th graders on national assessments as evidence that they are not prepared to meet high academic standards. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, only about three in 10 could demonstrate proficiency in reading and mathematics. Advocates of high school reform often point to the failure of middle schools to prepare students to tackle a challenging secondary-level curriculum.

"Why are schools not systematically monitoring early signs of academic withdrawal?" said Sandra L. Christenson, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in Minneapolis. "If you are systematically monitoring alterable variables, then you can target students for intervention to change their future."

Ms. Christenson helped develop the Check & Connect program more than a decade ago. The intervention program assigns a mentor to students considered at risk academically to check attendance, grades, and other concerns and to work with students and their families to head off school failure. Despite evidence of the success of her program and others like it, Ms. Christenson said, it has not spread to

middle schools because of the time and expense. Check & Connect costs about \$1,300 per student.

Although still widely considered the weak link between elementary and secondary education, middle schools have not garnered as much attention as the earlier and later grades, which have begun to benefit from federal initiatives and privately financed school improvement efforts.

Last fall, legislation was introduced in Congress to support a middle-grades clearinghouse, research projects, and grants to districts using instructional models that have been found effective. Those bills were referred to the Senate education committee and a House subcommittee, and could be attached to proposals for reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

The movement to create schools more responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents began more than 30 years ago. Then in 1996, American middle and high school students lagged on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS—results that put a harsh spotlight on the middle grades. The next year, a group of advocates formed the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform to help improve curricula, instruction, and research in the field.

Now, the accountability measures required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, observers say, have been raising the stakes for middle school educators and again putting the focus on academic rigor.

Middle school advocates say that push requires more than an emphasis on test scores.

“While we prepare students for testing, it’s also important to prepare them for other aspects of living and knowing,” said Drew Sawyer, the principal of Rogers-Herr Middle School.

Here in North Carolina, the 33,000-student Durham school district is working with all its middle schools to do both. Officials here have instituted a number of strategies to ensure consistent monitoring and support of students, particularly those in the middle grades.

As part of its high school completion plan, the district has begun to track students’ attendance, discipline records, and academic performance, and it sends that information to schools each month. School counselors and truancy officers have ramped up home visits for students who have missed a significant number of days and haven’t responded to phone calls and letters. Local judges volunteer time once a week to hold truancy court for students with patterns of poor attendance, their parents, social workers, and

school officials to outline state mandates and the potential consequences of flouting them.

“Truancy is often a symptom of other, underlying family and personal issues, and a lot of times that’s brought out in truancy court,” said Debra Pitman, the district’s assistant superintendent for student-support services. “In truancy court, the problem-solvers are right there in a formal setting, and with a layer of compassion, the message is that this is very serious.”

School officials have instituted more effective discipline approaches that have reduced suspension rates, and built formal partnerships with other agencies in Durham to help families get the health, legal, and financial services they need. They have also retrained school counselors to seek out students who need help, rather than waiting for them to knock on their doors. The counselors give extra attention to students who have a history of academic difficulties or attendance problems.

Each middle school offers after-school academic and recreation programs, as well as daily classes to help students catch up in their schoolwork or move ahead with a more

the dress code and expectations for conduct. First period is “core plus,” designed for catching up on classwork or doing extra-credit assignments.

One recent morning, Karine Thate, a 7th grade science teacher, checks a grade book that lists incomplete assignments, projects, and homework for each student. Ms. Thate moves from student to student, reviewing their homework binders, helping them organize their work, and clarifying instructions.

“Aren’t you supposed to show your work?” she asks one boy as she checks his math homework. “This is your chance to change some of your zero grades by giving me a completed assignment,” she tells her students just as the chatter grows louder. “You have 15 more minutes,” she reminds them. “Use it well.”

Several students are doing just that, as they prepare a multimedia presentation for an honors English/language arts class.

Later, during her science class, the teacher helps students produce video presentations that illustrate what they have been learning about the genetic characteristics of fruit flies. The stars of those movies—hundreds

“About 40 percent of eventual dropouts could be identified in the 6th grade, he estimates. “The only way to intervene is if we know who the kids are, and are familiar with their records in school.”

ROBERT BALFANZ

Research scientist, Center for the Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

challenging curriculum.

The district’s dropout rate for seniors has fallen over the past several years—to 4.9 percent for the 2006-07 school year—and is now below the state average.

With its diverse enrollment—69 percent black, 16 percent white, 10 percent Hispanic, and nearly 40 percent low-income—Rogers-Herr Middle School has seen results from the district’s efforts. Its attendance rate hovers above 96 percent, and it received a “high growth” designation from the state last year for its improved test scores. Last year, it also was recognized as one of North Carolina’s “schools to watch” by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform in Champaign, Ill. The designation goes to schools that infuse academic excellence, developmental appropriateness, and democratic education principles.

Each day, students here are welcomed with hugs and handshakes from teachers and administrators—as well as reminders on

of red- and brown-eyed flies—flutter in the glass vials that line the windowsill of the science lab. Illustrations of the flies’ life cycles, and the Punnett squares that show the probabilities of the genetic characteristics of their offspring, line the room.

“Raising the fruit flies and making the movie have really helped to bring [the lesson] to life,” says Adam Brown, who sits in a computer lab with classmate Lionel Nelson recording the narration for their movie.

“I’ve learned a lot about how traits are passed down from generation to generation,” Lionel says.

Even this kind of interactive, multimedia project doesn’t hold the attention of all students. Several pairs get distracted by the novel features of the software, while others sit idle, seemingly at a loss for what to record after having failed to prepare their scripts. Ms. Thate offers students a chance to catch up after school, but just a handful indicate they will use the extra lab time.

In other classes, similar signs of student indifference are on display. One boy spends much of the school day disrupting classes or distracting others. He loudly sharpens his pencil while the teacher lays out the day's lesson. He tugs at a girl's long hair, and shouts out inappropriate answers. One diligent student in the class complains that the teacher has to spend much of her time attending to the "troublemakers," making the class tedious or boring at times.

The boy's behavior and teachers' concerns about other students are raised later in a daily meeting Ms. Thate has with Ms. Cline and other members of their grade-level team.

"We have some kids who are working real hard to fail," Ms. Cline says. "We just keep trying to find what they're good at and use that to get them more involved. We tell them all the time that we care about them."

That philosophy carries throughout the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade corridors and other corners of the building, too, as is evident in the ease with which students and adults here interact.

Outside the lunchroom, for example, a group of 6th graders chats with Vince Bynum, a police officer assigned to the school, about their classes. Later, the officer shares a laugh with two students who volunteered to pick up trash in front of the school.

The principal's office is a stop-off for students throughout the day, but not because they're in trouble. Several sit at the table in Mr. Sawyer's office to discuss a conflict they have with their classmates. A student who has missed several weeks of school for medical reasons asks the principal to review his new class schedule. Another boy explains an argument he's had with a teacher, trying to convince Mr. Sawyer that there was no good reason for her to reject one of the boy's assignments.

"Now I know you didn't speak to [the teacher] in the same tone you're using now," the principal says, reminding the student to be respectful. He sends him off with some tips for continuing the discussion with the teacher.

Despite the progress, Mr. Sawyer still sees his share of discipline and academic problems.

But he and his colleagues are working at devising the strategies and building the relationships that can help head off those problems for most students.

"We are every other middle school, with the same challenges and celebrations," Mr. Sawyer said. "Our problems are just not as visible because we try to get out ahead of them."

*Coverage of new schooling arrangements and classroom improvement efforts is supported by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation.*

*Published February 13, 2008, in Education Week*

# Promises of Money Meant to Heighten Student Motivation

By Katie Ash

**D**oes motivating students to study harder with the promise of cash sound like innovation—or bribery?

That's a question educators and researchers have been debating, amid concerns that money-for-achievement programs actually decrease students' intrinsic motivation to learn and send mixed messages about studying.

But the idea is catching on, with new cash-incentive programs planning to give money to students this school year in the Baltimore school district and some schools in an Atlanta suburb. Last school year, the 1.1 million-student New York City school system began a program to evaluate the effect of paying students for academic performance, joining a growing list of those testing the idea.

"The possible outcomes from ... not graduating from high school are so great that I felt that putting a program in place that could rescue some of these students was a small risk to take," said Andrés Alonso, the chief executive officer of the 82,000-student Baltimore system, which is in the process of launching its new money-for-achievement program.

The program will award 10th and 11th graders who have failed at least one of their state graduation exams \$25 if they show a 5 percent increase on the first of their benchmark assessments, which students take throughout the year.

Students are then eligible to earn another \$35 if they increase their scores by an additional 15 percent on the next benchmark assessment, and \$50 if they raise their scores by another 20 percent after that, bringing their total potential earnings to as much as \$110 a year.

The program is especially geared to students who may not be able to take advan-

tage of after-school tutoring programs because of financial needs that require them to have jobs, Mr. Alonso added. "This is a way to reimburse them for missing that work," he said.

## Doubts Overcome

Mr. Alonso concedes the \$110 is not nearly as much as they could earn working after school. (It amounts to about 18 hours of work at the minimum wage in Maryland of \$6.15 an hour.) But it could be enough for students to take a few days off to attend tutoring sessions.

The state expects to pay \$935,000 for the incentives, which are part of a \$6.3 million Maryland initiative aimed at increasing state graduation-exam scores. That initiative also includes money to pay high school peer tutors at a rate of \$10 per hour.

"I think [the incentive program] is a very, very positive thing," said Benia C. Richardson, a senior at Western High School in Baltimore and the president of her school's Student Government Association. "[School officials] have to say, OK, [students] want to graduate, but what's going to keep them here right now?"

Ms. Richardson admitted that she was skeptical about the program when it was first introduced in January, but now that her initial questions have been answered, she fully supports the effort.

"There is a lot of energy behind [this]," she said. "You're always going to have doubters, ... but I think the only way you can be a doubter is if you don't know [the specifics of the program]."

Similarly, in suburban Atlanta, two schools in the 88,000-student Fulton County, Ga., district will take part in a privately financed, 15-week pilot program, called Learn and Earn, which aims to

boost students' progress and achievement in mathematics and science through cash incentives.

Twenty 11th graders from the 2,500-student Creekside High School and 20 8th graders from the 985-student Bear Creek Middle School have been selected to participate in the program, launched in January, based on their attendance records, grades, previous test scores, and socioeconomic status.

Like Baltimore's program, Learn and Earn especially targets 11th graders who have part-time jobs and have trouble attending after-school study sessions, said Gregory O. Fields, the Fulton County schools' assistant superintendent for high school curriculum.

The students earn \$8 an hour by attending the after-school math and science tutorial sessions for up to four hours a week, and they can earn a bonus—\$75 for 8th graders and \$125 for 11th graders—if they achieve at least a B average in both their math and science courses and pass the state exams in those subjects.

"The most important outcome within all of this is to help these students build the necessary confidence and awareness of their genuine educational abilities to be successful in school and life," Mr. Fields said.

The \$60,000 program has been funded by Charles Loudermilk, the founder, chairman, and chief executive officer of Aaron Rents Inc., through the Atlanta-based Learning Makes a Difference Foundation.

"You would love for students to be self-motivated, but ... if [they] don't realize that's achievable, [they] don't necessarily strive to do that," said Jackie Cushman, the chairman of the Learning Makes a Difference board of directors.

### 'Tangible for Kids'

In starting Baltimore's money-for-achievement program, Mr. Alonso was influenced by a similar initiative launched in the New York City district. He was the deputy chancellor there while that program was being formed.

The privately-funded New York program, established by Roland G. Fryer, the chief equality officer for the city's department of education and an assistant professor of economics at Harvard University, rewards 4th and 7th graders with cash based on their performance on year-round assessments. Fourth-graders could earn up to \$250 per year, while 7th-graders could earn as much as \$500.

The program, which is part of a bigger initiative aimed at expanding opportunities for low-income families called Opportunity NYC, has a budget of \$6 million over two years.

"If you live in a more affluent neighborhood, you see automatically that education

pays off. When you live in [a low-income community], it's harder to understand," Mr. Fryer said. "These programs, when done right, are trying to make education more tangible for kids."

So far, the city has no data on the outcomes of the initiative, which began in 60 schools last June.

Research on other programs has begun to trickle in, although the jury is still out on their effectiveness.

A recent study by C. Kirabo Jackson, a professor of labor economics at Cornell University, in Ithaca, N.Y., found that a Texas program that pays students in disadvantaged public schools for passing Advanced Placement exams has been accompanied by increased participation in AP classes and higher scores on the exams. (*See Education Week, Jan. 16, 2008.*)

But Mr. Jackson isn't so sure that the promise of cash is solely responsible for the increase.

"[It's] more that there's a cultural change in the school on the part of the teachers and the students," he said. "Teachers have a more inclusive attitude towards AP tests, and students are more likely to take them."

### Strategy Debated

However, some critics believe that using external rewards to motivate students can squelch internal desire, or intrinsic motivation, to learn.

"The assumption seems to be [that] what works to train the family pet will also work to help children become engaged and proficient learners," said Alfie Kohn, an education writer and a leading opponent of cash-incentive programs. "Unfortunately, the available research unequivocally shows that dangling incentives in front of kids isn't just ineffective, but actually counterproductive."

But not all researchers dismiss cash-for-scores programs.

"These programs can either be pretty sensible, or they can sound pretty catastrophic," said Daniel T. Willingham, a professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville.

Programs with the best results tend to "pay a lot of attention to who the students are, and have a very clear rationale in mind as to why you are choosing to reward these students," he said.

Reducing students' intrinsic motivation to study may be a risk educators are taking, but "it may not be a danger [with these programs] because you only get that effect when you're dealing with something the student liked to do [in the first place]," Mr. Willingham added.

Published April 12, 2006, in *Education Week*

# New Center Aims to Help Motivate Calif. High Schoolers

Related poll shows student support for career-related schools

By Linda Jacobson

Hoping to motivate more California students to finish high school and find future success, the James Irvine Foundation last week announced a new center aimed at expanding work-based learning programs that integrate high-level academics.

Called ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career, the new project will seek to provide solutions to the problems highlighted in a new poll, also sponsored by the foundation.

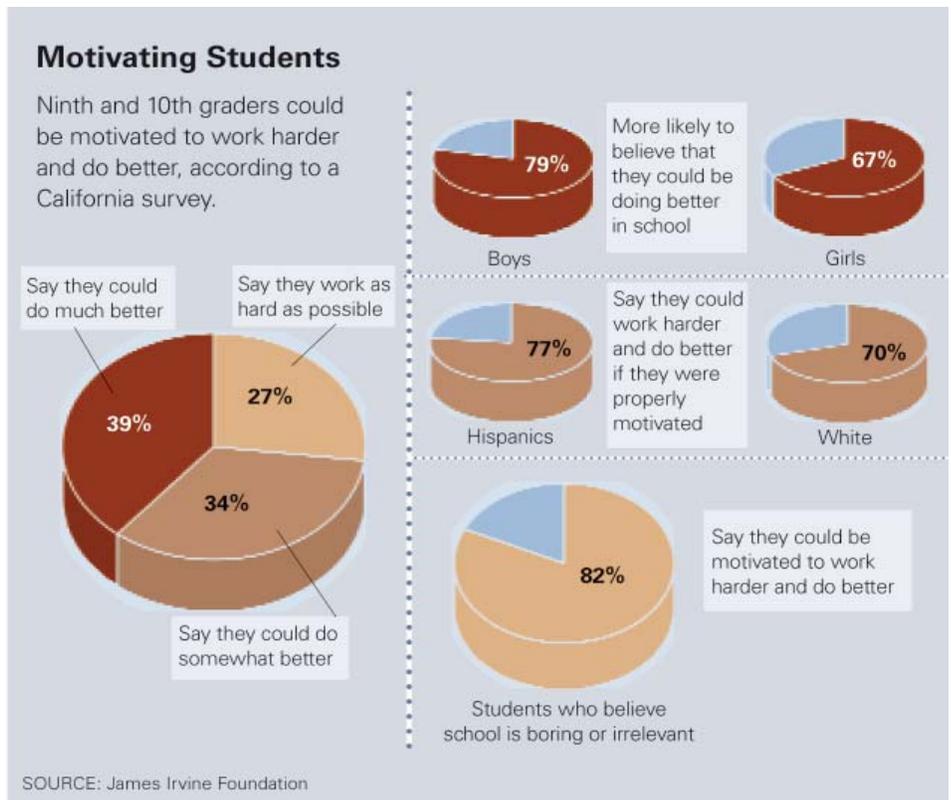
ConnectEd, based in Berkeley, will serve as a hub for creative practices, policies, and research on how to ensure that more of the state's students complete high school and have the skills they need for a job or for college, organizers say.

The center will stress "real world" learning that blends high-quality technical and career education with rigorous academic content.

Concerned about global competition and widening income gaps in the U.S. economy, policymakers across the nation are turning with increasing urgency to the issue of college and workforce preparation. (*See Education Week, March 22, 2006.*)

Examples of what the center's organizers would like to see replicated across the state include Health Professions High School, which opened last fall in Sacramento. With 150 freshmen this year, the school uses a health-care theme to provide an academic curriculum, leadership experiences, and opportunities for students to apply what they've learned.

Board members for ConnectEd include Jeannie Oakes, an education professor at the University of California, Los Angeles; Ramon



C. Cortines, a former district schools chief in New York City and San Francisco; and Ted Mitchell, the chairman of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Advisory Committee on Education Excellence.

## Survey Findings

The poll released last week by the foundation found that fewer than 40 percent of California's 9th and 10th graders say they really like going to school and feel high school does a good job of motivating them to do their best work.

The poll results also show that almost three-fourths of the students surveyed said they could be doing better if they felt motivated to work harder.

"It's so clear that we have to do a better job of preparing students for both college and career," Gavin Payne, California's deputy superintendent of education, said during a teleconference on the poll. He added that many students "have interests and learning styles which don't fit the pathways that are offered" in traditional high schools.

Roughly 75 percent of students polled agreed that the idea of a school that prepares them for college and employment is appealing. Seventy-six percent said they would like to attend school in "small learning communities" focused on a particular profession.

"California high schools' current structure works well for many students, but there is clear room for improvement for the majority of students," the report on the results says.

For the poll, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, based in Washington, surveyed 619 9th and 10th graders in California who are deemed at risk of falling behind academically. The margin of error is 4.1 percentage points.

## Governor's Plan

The Irvine Foundation, based in San Francisco, sponsored the poll as a follow-up to its funding of a study last year on California's high school dropout problem. That study was conducted by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and showed that only 69 percent of the state's students graduate from high school on time. The rates are even lower for African-American and Hispanic students.

The new poll results come as Gov. Schwarzenegger is drawing more attention to career and technical education as a way to keep students interested in school. He is recommending \$50 million to expand such programs in middle school through community college and to help high schools link their vocational programs with those in community colleges.

Published August 30, 2006, in *Education Week*

## CHAT HIGHLIGHTS

# STUDENT MOTIVATION: What Works, What Doesn't

On August 30, 2006, Edward L. Deci, Carol Dweck, and Susan Graham answered readers' questions on motivating students. The following is an excerpt from that chat. To read the transcript in full, visit: [http://www.edweek.org/chat/transcript\\_08\\_30\\_06.html](http://www.edweek.org/chat/transcript_08_30_06.html)

**EDWARD L. DECI** is professor of psychology at the University of Rochester. **CAROL DWECK** is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and **SUSAN GRAHAM** is a middle school teacher at Gayle Middle School, Stafford County, Va.

### **Are there group differences by age, gender and/or ethnicity for causal factors and solutions for student motivation?**

**EDWARD L. DECI:** Generally, there are not these types of group difference. In other words, the basic principles of motivation are the same for all groups of students. Of course, there are superficial differences. For examples, the content of texts that males versus females, or African-Americans versus Caucasians find interesting will differ, and thus the motivation for doing a particular task might be different by groups. But the basic principle that all students will need to feel a sense of (1) competence of efficacy, (2) autonomy or self-initiation, and (3) relatedness to others in the learning setting in order to be optimally motivated does not differ by groups. The solutions for student motivation come from examining the degree to which the interpersonal climate in a learning setting allows students to satisfy their three basic psychological needs (i.e., competence, autonomy, and relatedness). To the extent that they are able to satisfy their needs by doing school-related work, they are likely to be motivated.

**Due to the nature of the subjects I teach, it is easy to get most students engaged in**

**learning, wanting to do their best. There are a few students who have built such a wall around themselves though that I can't get them to trust me let alone teach them anything. What are some ways to break down this barrier?**

**SUSAN GRAHAM:** Are you a fine or practical arts teacher? We often have the luxury of having students choose our classes, but occasionally I get students who considered taking Teen Living 8 as the lesser of the evils presented. I respect that wall of indifference when I confront it because it may be the only defense the reluctant learner has against failure. Benign neglect can sometimes provide enough privacy for this student to risk trying something new. But excessive praise for a tentative effort can drive them back behind to their safe haven of non-engagement. I think it raises the risk factor beyond their toleration level.

Rubrics that require both self-assessments and teacher assessment can be effective motivators. When my students produce a product, they must evaluate their own work based on quality of the product and quality of the work process. I discovered quite by accident that expectation of performance and actual performance are often completely disconnected. Low-achieving students predicted low grades even when they gave themselves mid to high scores on the rubric. Conversely, students who tend to perform well in academic classes, but have pretty poor motor skills have stated that they deserved a high grade because "I always make A's". When students can recognize their own successes and identify their own need for improvement, they are more likely to take ownership of their own learning.

**What is your opinion of intrinsic motivation as a personality trait? Is there a correlation between teacher self-efficacy and student motivation?**

**CAROL DWECK:** My specialty in motivation is the study of students' beliefs about their

intelligence. My research shows that students who believe their intelligence is fixed (they have only so much, and that's that) tend to worry about how smart they really are. Their motivation and engagement are tentative—when a task gets too hard, they lose interest and flee. But students who believe their intelligence can be developed get deeply involved in learning and remain engaged in the face of difficulty. We have shown in many studies that their engagement and intrinsic motivation is hardier.

However, this does not mean that intrinsic motivation is simply a stable personality trait. When we have taught students the view that intellectual skills can be developed, their intrinsic motivation and their engagement in their schoolwork take a sharp turn for the better. In my writings, I talk about how teachers can encourage this view.

**At my school, we have found that the greatest motivation comes from students knowing exactly what they have not mastered, conferencing with them, and keeping this information in front of them. This is very difficult with new teachers and data organization. What success have other schools had in organizing data, teaching teachers how to assess what students know, and giving feedback on a regular basis to their students?**

**EDWARD L. DECI:** I believe that non-critical, non-evaluative feedback is extremely important for motivation. Feedback has to be fairly concrete and presented in a way that is not pressuring, not controlling, and not demeaning in order for the students to truly benefit from it. For students to get good feedback and for teachers to conference with them about their progress is very important. It is especially important in those conferences to elicit the students' perspectives about their own performance, to hear out their concerns, and to have a real interchange, not just a meeting in which a teacher [imposes] his or her views on the student. Doing this takes skill on the teacher's part, and for adminis-

trators and seasoned teachers to help new ones develop these skills will help the whole school.

**What role does the larger community play in motivating students, especially at the secondary level? How can community groups (businesses, youth groups, social services, etc.) work together to foster motivation for learning in adolescents?**

CAROL DWECK: The community can play an important role in motivating students. Often community groups seek to identify and reward the students with obvious brains and talent, ones who are already thriving—and that's fine to a certain extent. However, to really motivate students in general, community groups should emphasize their interest in the development of talent. When I first surveyed the literature on people who have made outstanding contributions in all walks of life, I was amazed to find that most of them were not outstanding or unusually talented to begin with. They had passion and commitment, and they developed into the extraordinary people they became. Community groups can look for this passion and commitment, and help students gain the resources to turn their passion into genuine accomplishment.

**What teaching strategies increase student motivation?**

SUSAN GRAHAM: The most effective instructional strategies are ones that put students in control. I am a firm believer in discovery or project-based [learning] because students use multiple learning modalities that encourage development of skills and mastery of concepts at the same time. Students who see a connection between the concepts they are learning, the authentic assessment they are developing, and the real life application beyond the classroom have answered the ultimate student motivation question—"Why do we have to learn this?". Time on task improves, and classroom management problems decrease. I teach Family and Consumer Science so I have the luxury of food preparation to reinforce life and physical science content. History can be revisited in terms of clothing and housing. When students go home, they may remember the project first, but the likelihood that they will recall the concepts goes way up. Of course the great responsibility of the teacher is not to allow producing a project to displace the concepts that it was intended to reinforce.

**I am interested in how teacher stress and emotion regulation affect students' academic performance. Do you have any data on how**

**teacher stress and emotion regulation affect their ability to motivate their students? From my observations, skillful teachers can skillfully use positive emotions to generate enthusiasm and interest. It would seem that anxiety, nervousness, etc. would have the opposite effect.**

EDWARD L. DECI: When teachers are stressed, they tend to be controlling and demanding with students, and they tend not to provide support and enthusiasm for the students. This has been shown to have a strongly negative effect on the students' motivation and performance. Students need an accepting, supportive, and nourishing context in which to learn, and teachers who are feeling negative emotions and are not effective in managing them will not be able to supply the needed support to students. Teachers' enthusiasm about teaching has been shown to positively affect student enthusiasm about learning.

**What evidence is there that homework influences motivation?**

CAROL DWECK: It is not homework per se that influences motivation, but the type of homework that is given. Hours of tedious drills can drain students' enjoyment of a subject, whereas assignments that help them realize the importance of a subject, learn interesting things about the subject, and feel a sense of progress in the subject can clearly enhance motivation.

A teacher should always think: What am I conveying to students with this homework assignment? What is my goal for the students? If the answer is that your goal is to help them to understand something important, new, and interesting, then you're on the right track.

**When a student has failed a state test that is required for graduation several times, how do you motivate him to continue to study?**

EDWARD L. DECI: Have individual meetings with him or her. Try to understand what is going on for the student with respect to the subjects and the tests. Keep your own enthusiasm for the student's succeeding; provide specific and meaningful feedback that allows the student to understand what he or she is doing well; and work with the student to solve the problem of how to succeed. The solutions to these problems have to be built on the student's particular circumstances.

**How can educators best engage parents to help keep students motivated to complete work outside of the classroom?**

SUSAN GRAHAM: Or to paraphrase your question: How do we motivate parents to

motivate their children? First of all, teachers need to be sensitive to ownership of children and their time. Just as the teacher would probably resent a student being pulled out of class to take care of nonessential family business; parents may feel that we are infringing on their time and territory with nonessential assignments.

Before assigning outside work, I would suggest that the teacher ask herself: How does this assignment support my instructional goal? Have I clarified the learning goal and value of the assignment to my students? Can the student articulate the purpose of the assignment to his parent? Will completion of this assignment compete with the priorities that parents have set for their families? How do I feel about my supervisor presenting me with work to be done on my time at home? (Ouch!) Parents want to see their children to be successful, but they don't want to see their children frustrated or burdened with work for which they can see little value. This doesn't mean that I am anti-homework; it just needs to meet real learning goals to be motivating for students and parents. Judicious use of outside assignments and good communication with parents is essential if we expect parents to accept us as partners in the development of their children.

**How do teachers and educators foster intrinsic motivation to learn rather than focus on the external rewards often associated with successful learning (extrinsic motivators)? Also, the question of teacher motivation—is the focus of the teaching on grades, state tests and assessments versus love of learning, independent, or self-directed learning? Should the focus be on teacher motivation first perhaps?**

EDWARD L. DECI: Teachers' motivation for teaching very much affects students' motivation for learning. When teachers are interested and enthusiastic, there is a far greater chance that the students will also be interested and enthusiastic. We have found that when teachers are pressured and controlled, they in turn pressure and control students. So we need to do the opposite—that is support teachers, not pressure and control them.

Yes, teachers need to be autonomously motivated, and the school systems need to provide them the supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness they need to be autonomously motivated. When teachers have the supports for satisfying their needs, they in turn support students for satisfying theirs. In that case, teachers are motivated to teach and students are motivated to learn.

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## COMMENTARY

# Boredom in Class? Try 'Outrageous' Instruction

By Stanley Pogrow

We will not make much progress in achieving educational equity until we develop better approaches for dealing with student boredom and resistance. But student access to on-demand entertainment has made it harder than ever for teachers to interest their classes—members of the YouTube generation—in what they are being mandated to cover. The old standbys of telling students they have to know it because it will be on the test, or making it “authentic,” that is, trying to convince students they will need to know it as adults, have little effect on many students. They are not adults and may be rebelling against adult ideas.

I decided to tackle the problems of student boredom and resistance when I supervised student-teachers at the University of Arizona. Most of my student-teachers were placed in low-achieving, high-poverty urban middle and high schools.

Even as my student-teachers grew more skillful in managing classrooms, presenting content, and maintaining discipline, their students remained listless in class. Lots of time continued to be lost to the typical student whining. And, to be honest, I was bored by the lessons myself. The student-teachers, too, were disappointed that their students were not hanging on their every word or exhibiting a thirst for knowledge. They quickly scaled down their expectations of what teaching could and should be. Student apathy and resistance had won out yet again.

Could my student-teachers develop fascinating lessons that would rivet the students of the YouTube generation? I felt the need to intervene—even if only to maintain my sanity over the course of observing 64 lessons a semester. I wanted to see some excitement in teaching and learning for everyone's sake. So I asked my student-teachers to design one “dramatic” lesson. I provided them with just a two-hour overview of the components of drama and turned them loose to develop

dramatic lessons that (1) covered the same content they were scheduled to teach conventionally that period, (2) had new content and was not a review lesson, and (3) maintained the dramatic context throughout, and was used as the basis for teaching the content, not just to intrigue students at the start of the period.

I had no idea what would happen, nor did my student-teachers. They approached this lesson, which was toward the end of the semester, with the same trepidation they had approached the first day of taking over a classroom. Would they lose control of the class? Would their students respond, or would they think the lesson was stupid?

To my delight and amazement, and to theirs, the student-teachers delivered some of the most masterful teaching I have ever witnessed. They broke all the rules. In some cases, the dramatic contexts or storylines they invented called for them to run in and out of the classroom, or teach while hiding under the desk, or teach with their heads on the desk most of the period, or pretend to be crazy. These contexts and storylines were orchestrated, such that students needed to learn the content to help the teacher or themselves resolve some issue of concern, or to help/rescue someone or something.

In most cases, the actual content of these lessons was prosaic, arcane, or complex, and engaging students using conventional instruction would have been problematic. By surprising them with these unorthodox approaches, the teachers made their lessons magical moments in which students had no idea what was going to happen next. And, frankly, neither did I.

We were transfixed, trying to figure out what was going on. My student-teachers never lost control of their classes, because their students were so fascinated and puzzled. For these lessons at least, the student-teachers' idealized visions of what teaching would be came true. Their students hung on

The bottom line is that when teachers taught “outrageously,” there was no boredom or resistance, and the amount and depth of learning increased—for everyone. Teachers were re-energized about the possibilities of their craft and what they could achieve with their students. This was real and powerful reform.

their every word and gesture. When they were asked to do something, they quickly and quietly followed directions. No one asked to go to the bathroom, or complained that they did not know what to do, or said they were missing a pencil. Former passive-resistant learners became initiatory leaders. These lessons were meaningful to students in terms of how they thought (“creative authenticity”), and learning was now driven by passion and emotion.

I call this process of using dramatic technique as the primary method for teaching existing content objectives efficiently “outrageous content instruction” (as opposed to other uses of dramatic technique that generally reinforce or review content already

taught, or that develop non-content objectives such as self-expression). The techniques of “outrageous instruction” were refined over time into a series of easily learned principles that were applicable across the content areas, and that transformed the teaching-learning process for even the oldest and most resistant learners. I discuss these principles and lesson planning techniques, with samples of outrageous lessons across the content areas in grades 4-12, in the book *Teaching Content Outrageously*.

I can share here the following insights drawn from our research: (1) When teachers harness their imaginations to teaching in an “outrageous” fashion, students likewise use imagination to learn—and the most underperforming, jaded students do the best. (2) The learning that occurred was deep and sustained. Classes taught Outrageously did better on the end-of-unit test—even if only their first lesson had been taught dramatically. (3) Even a single Outrageous lesson had major impact in changing how students viewed their teacher, and on their appreciation of the importance of learning content. (4) The rules that work for teaching Outrageous lessons are almost the total opposite of the ones for conventional instruction.

The bottom line is that when teachers taught “outrageously,” there was no boredom or resistance, and the amount and depth of learning increased—for everyone. Teachers were re-energized about the possibilities of their craft and what they could achieve with their students. This was real and powerful reform.

Yet, this reform did not cost any extra money or require elaborate in-service training. This creative approach was as applicable to the current standards-based accountability era as it would be to a progressive era. All this transformation required was that teachers be given the encouragement to tap in to their imagination.

If providing students with a single Outrageous lesson from a single teacher had such effects, what would happen if every teacher in a school taught two such lessons a year? We do not know. But this seems to be a reasonable goal that might revitalize teaching and increase student learning. It could be achieved by simply establishing a schoolwide book club and having leaders encourage teachers to develop and share their periodic Outrageous lessons and experiences. (There is also a blog where teachers can post their successful lessons and share them: [outrageousteaching.blogspot.com](http://outrageousteaching.blogspot.com).)

The use of imagination is the most powerful teaching and learning technology available to us to overcome student boredom and resistance. The images of the mind are far more high-def than the most advanced computers or TVs. By reaching inward into our magnificent minds, we can create new dynamics of practice that are enriching for everyone—while also measurably increasing learning. We do not need to continue to offer students with the most imagination and creativity the least-imaginative approaches to teaching them.

In short, we should no longer think of reform only in terms of reaching outward to try to obtain more resources to provide more services (though that is certainly important). We also must begin to think of reform as reaching inward as individuals to use the most powerful technology available to us, one that is ubiquitous and free: the power of the human imagination. We all can, and must, be outrageous some of the time.

*Stanley Pogrow is a professor of educational leadership at San Francisco State University, where he specializes in reducing the learning gap. His new book is Teaching Content Outrageously: How to Captivate All Students and Accelerate Learning, Grades 4-12, published by Jossey-Bass. He can be reached at [stanpogrow@att.net](mailto:stanpogrow@att.net).*

WEB  
LINKS

## RESOURCES

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## Resources on Motivation

Center for the Social Organization of Schools, at Johns Hopkins University  
<http://web.jhu.edu/csos>

Check & Connect program  
<http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect/>

National Association for College Admission Counseling  
<http://www.nacacnet.org/Pages/default.aspx>

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform  
<http://www.mgforum.org/>

Survey of 9th and 10th Graders in California, sponsored by the James Irvine Foundation  
[http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/downloads/irvine\\_poll.pdf](http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/downloads/irvine_poll.pdf)

Teaching Strategies: Motivating Students, from the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching  
<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tsms.php>

Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, on student motivation  
[http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching\\_resources/interactions/motivating.htm](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/interactions/motivating.htm)

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