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Engaging Minds: Motivation and Learning in America's Public Schools

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Rising standards and accountability, by themselves, do little to increase student achievement. The task of acquiring knowledge and skills requires sustained effort by the student. Without both standards and motivation, the improved outcomes sought by school reformers are never going to happen.

For the past twenty-five years, insufficient student effort has been a major weakness in school reform initiatives. Goslin estimates that 25% of the student population wants to learn and will do so; 50% are engaged only to the point of "getting by" (avoiding social stigma or negative consequences); and 25% are not engaged at all.

Because most formal learning tasks require a significant effort on the part of the learner, the satisfaction derived from mastering the task, is rarely sufficient. Extrinsic rewards such as praise, attention, special privileges, and other forms of recognition are typically necessary for difficult or repetitive tasks.

A variety of barriers can hamper student effort. One is a widely held but self-defeating belief about the relationship between effort and ability. Young children typically learn from their parents that effort is commendable—it is a key to success. In their world, a "good" student is one who works hard and completes assignments. Middle school students, however, have learned to compare themselves to one another and apply different standards. Greater effort is associated with lesser ability. By puberty, students often worry more about peer opinion than school success. Frequently, they conceal or avoid effort because they believe it reflects badly on their ability.

By contrast, Japanese society places far greater emphasis on effort--as evidenced by the well-documented statistics on hours worked per week. Children understand from a very young age that effort is valued and is a measure of success. Thus, by fifth grade (when many American students begin to coast on ability rather than effort), a gap in test scores emerges, with the Japanese taking a lead that they will maintain through high school.

Another barrier to motivation is the scarcity of rewards for most students. Schools give recognition to high performing students but it is often the same few individuals who garner those awards year after year. Awards won in competition can be effective motivators but only for those students who have a realistic chance of attaining them. Children who are below the top tier need incentives too--especially in areas such as spelling or multiplication where practice is needed and intrinsic satisfactions may be low. Without the availability of effective incentives, the satisfactions inherent in play and entertainment can easily become overwhelming distractions.

Yet another barrier to motivation is the inefficiency inherent in so many classroom learning activities. Simply put, effort is not rewarded with accomplishment because teachers use untested and ineffective activities—often ones that have been created ad hoc. Goslin blames the problem on the high degree of local autonomy had by teachers and schools in choosing curricula and teaching practices.

Everyone has experienced situations in which the effort involved in learning is wasted or misdirected and therefore either does not result in learning or causes learning to take much longer than it might have. When this happens, motivation to stay engaged in the learning process may be eroded, if not dissipated entirely. Thus, engagement in learning is affected directly by the efficiency of the learning process. (p.85)

Goslin argues that by using proven instructional methods and standardized lesson plans, wasted effort could be greatly reduced, producing far greater learning and satisfaction relative to effort invested. He also suggests that enhanced parental and societal support would be advantageous.

Although not explicitly discussed, Goslin's view clearly implies the need for schools of education to equip teachers with teaching practices of proven effectiveness. To the contrary, however, most teacher training programs conceive of good teaching as the individualized application of general principles to students and situations, not the use of well-tested and polished lessons.

Goslin highlights adult attention as a key factor in motivating learners. From infancy, children crave attention, praise, and recognition of their accomplishments. For example, mastery of oral language is a monumental task requiring sustained effort, yet most children accomplish it within a few short years because their verbal expressions are rewarded with adult attention.

Optimizing student motivation and engagement will require improved cooperation of parents, teachers, schools, and society in several areas:

- Emphasizing the relationship of effort to success;
- Placing a higher value on academic achievement;
- Using proven instructional methods and lesson plans;
- Providing a sufficient quantity of extrinsic rewards to effect student interest;
- Restricting the competition of outside interests.

The broadest impediments to the sustained engagement of American students are primarily cultural: academic success is not as highly valued as it should be, and the numerous non-educational attractions that compete for the time and attention of students. As long as the public accepts the notion that aim of being "well-rounded" is an acceptable substitute for core subject mastery, it is likely that inadequate student motivation will continue to be a major hindrance to improved school achievement.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com