



Addressing Barriers

to Learning

New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link



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School Dropout Prevention: A Civil Rights and Public Health Imperative

As the true dropout figures emerge across the nation, the crisis nature of the problem is apparent. Recent reports indicate that more than half a million young people drop out of high school each year, and the rate at which they drop out has remained about the same for the last 30 years (Dynarski, et al., 2008). The data confirm that in far too many school districts a majority of students do not have sufficient supports to enable them to succeed at school and will not graduate.

As Gary Orfield, director of the Civil Rights project has stressed:

There is a high school dropout crisis far beyond the imagination of most Americans, concentrated in urban schools and relegating many thousands of minority children to a life of failure. ... Only half of our nation's minority students graduate from high school along with their peers. For many groups – Latino, black, or Native American males—graduation rates are even lower. ... this [is an] educational and civil rights crisis.

In terms of economics, social programs, and public health, Russell Rumberger has pointed out that the U.S.A. loses over \$192 billion in income and tax revenues for each cohort of students who never complete high school. Relatedly, Dynarski and colleagues (2008) emphasize:

Dropouts contribute only about half as much in taxes.... They draw larger government subsidies in the form of food stamps, housing assistance, and welfare payments. They have a dramatically increased chance of landing in prison, and they have worse health outcomes and lower life expectancies.

It should be clear to everyone that schools experiencing the most problems are the ones most in need of a school improvement process that not only directly improves instruction, but also includes strategies for developing a comprehensive system of student/learning supports (see Exhibit on next page). Unfortunately, during the discussion of the impending reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), currently called *No Child Left Behind*, most of the proposals are limited to debates

about standards and measures for academic accountability. Even those that go beyond this emphasis have not been broad enough to address what is needed to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

At this time, every indication is that efforts to develop a comprehensive system of learning supports continue to be marginalized. As our Center stresses in various policy and practice reports, this is true for school improvement, in general, and for discussions related to reauthorizing the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, in particular. It is clear that the many specific agenda items currently competing for sparse resources tend to maintain the unsatisfactory status quo that characterizes the

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Exhibit

Academics and Beyond: A Commitment to Equity of Opportunity

It is a given that a strong academic program is the foundation from which all other school interventions must operate. That is, the base for equity is effective personalized instruction (e.g., instructional approaches that account for both individual and group interests, strengths, and weaknesses). However, if there is to be equity of opportunity with respect to public education, policy guidelines and practices also must meet the challenge of enabling learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

THE CHALLENGE

- Every school has a wide range of learners and must ensure equity of opportunity for *all* students and not just a few.
- External and internal barriers to learning and teaching interfere with schools achieving their mission.
- For the many students in need, school districts must design and implement learning support systems that are comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive, and institutionalize them at every school.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

- Learning support systems must address barriers to learning and teaching and ensure that students are engaged and re-engaged in classroom learning. Such systems must reflect the best available science, with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation theory and practices. A key facet of this not only involves engaging students from the point at which they enter but, after a few years of schooling, also requires a strong emphasis on re-engaging those who have actively disengaged from learning what schools are trying to teach them. Re-engagement that is productive of learning is not about increasing social control, it is about promoting intrinsic motivation (see the relevant references at the end of this article).
- In order to meet the goal of all children learning to high standards or reaching proficiency, the system of learning supports must be fully integrated with instruction.
- Developing a comprehensive system of learning supports requires weaving together the resources of school, home, and community. This involves an operational infrastructure that ensures the learning supports system is treated as primary and essential in planning school improvement.
- Equity requires developing a comprehensive system of learning supports in every school in a district.
- Engagement and re-engagement at school (for students, staff, parents, and other stakeholders) requires empowerment of all and use of processes that equalize power and ensure equity and fairness in decision making. Equalizing power among stakeholders involves contractual agreements, and considerable capacity building.

nation's efforts to address major barriers to learning, development, and teaching.

Thus, for many of us, the critical question at this juncture is how to coalesce strategically around a unifying concept. A united effort is the key to breaking through the policy barrier preventing an appropriate exploration of what must happen so that all students truly have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

Dropout Prevention Resources

School staff and their community colleagues cannot wait for Congress to reauthorize the ESEA. So, we offer the following brief comments and some resources related to preventing student dropout.

- *Be proactive – prevent problems rather than wait for failure.* School factors can account for approximately two-thirds of the differences in mean school dropout rates. Available research suggests that being held back is the single strongest predictor of dropping out for both early and late dropouts. Data indicate that being held back one grade increases the risk of dropping out later by 40 to 50 percent, two grades by 90 percent. Below are resources that provide an overview on the topic of dropout prevention, including alternatives to retention.
 - >See the Center's intro packet on dropouts
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/DropoutPrev/dropout.pdf>
 - >See: *Youth in Transition* –
<http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/hrsd/prc/publications/research/2002-000121/page00.shtml>
- *Rethink classroom and school-wide approaches to (a) enhance engaged, personalized learning and (b) provide students the learning supports they need to succeed.* For prevention to be effective, schools must *engage* all students in learning. Doing this involves practices based on understanding *intrinsic* motivation and that use classroom assessments that inform personalized intervention (e.g., response to intervention).

Children at-risk need to be identified at a young age (as early as preschool). At every age interventions are needed to ensure students feel competent to succeed at school. Some need one-on-one support for a while. Special attention must be given to re-engaging those who have disengaged from classroom learning.

 - >See *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/cfe.pdf>
- *Enhance the professional development of teachers and support staff.* Ensure teachers have the knowledge and skills to ensure a wider range of students meet standards. Ensure that support staff know how to team with teachers in the classroom to rethink engagement, personalized intervention, and special assistance.
 - >See *Preparing All Education Personnel to Address Barriers to Learning & Teaching*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/preparingall.pdf>
- *Provide out-of-school opportunities.* Efforts using out-of-school opportunities to retain middle and high school students begin early. They include tutoring, mentoring, service learning, career advising, and more. When older students (including potential dropouts) work with younger ones, both can improve their literacy skills.

Service learning, for example, integrates community service into the academic curriculum. Investigators have found that when rigorous study in academic disciplines is linked to serious work on real needs, students' motivation to learn increases. When teachers are rigorous about partnering with young people to design and carry out service-learning projects that are tied to curricular objectives and standards, there are academic, intellectual, civic, ethical, social, and personal benefits.

 - >See Quick Find on *After-school Programs*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/afterschool.htm>
- *Offer multiple pathways.* Students need alternative career and vocational pathways that reflect high standards. The concept of multiple pathways focuses on ensuring choice among a variety of high school programs that prepare all students for both college and careers. The emphasis is on providing both academic and career foundations for advanced learning, training, and effective and responsible participation in society. Available choices reflect student interests and community strengths and opportunities. They include programs that provide real world training in areas where graduates can apply for living-wage jobs.
 - >See *Multiple Perspectives on Multiple Pathways*
<http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/mp/index.html>

- *Introduce non-traditional approaches.* Educational alternative programs provide a non-traditional approach by utilizing alternative teaching strategies. Programs focus upon the needs and interests of students by offering positive school experiences, which are geared for achievement, enhancement of positive self-concept, motivation, reduction of truancy, and reduction of disruptive behavior.
 - >See Quick Find on *Alternative Schools and Alternative Education*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/altschool.htm>
 - >See Quick Find on *Classroom-Enabling*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/classenable.htm>

Concluding Comments

Policy makers are revisiting the problem of preventing school dropouts. Ultimately, as with so many problems in our society, decreasing the rate of dropouts could be tremendously aided by reducing generational poverty. For the immediate future, however, the best opportunity to do something on a large-scale is tied to the impending reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*

In the meantime, individual schools will continue to do what they can. However, as Russell Rumberger sagely notes: Dropping out is "more of a process than an event ... and there are a lot of telltale signs along the way. It means there are a lot of places in the child's school career where we could intervene to help. It really is going to take some systemic change. Anything short of that is not going to be that successful." In this respect, we are reminded of John Maynard Keynes' insight that the hardest part of changing the course of any enterprise is escaping old ideas.

Note: In September 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released a practice guide on *Dropout Prevention*. This is one of a set of practice guides designed to provide practical recommendations to help address the everyday challenges faced in classrooms and schools. Developed by a panel of nationally recognized experts, practice guides consist of actionable recommendations, strategies for overcoming potential roadblocks, and an indication of the strength of evidence supporting each recommendation. The Department states that each practice guide is subjected to rigorous external peer review.

The *Dropout Prevention* guide provides recommendations that focus on reducing high school dropout rates. Strategies presented include identifying and advocating for at-risk students, implementing programs to improve behavior and social skills, and keeping students engaged in the school environment. Online at
http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp_pg_090308.pdf

We highlight this guide on page 6.

Need More?

>**Use the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Dropout Prevention*:**
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/dropout.html>

This resource contains links to key references, empirically supported programs, and centers specializing in the topic and related topics.

>**For some basic facts on the impact of the dropout problem, see**
http://www.dropoutprevention.org/stats/quick_facts.htm

>**Other Quick Finds that may be helpful** (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/> click on Quick Find Search)

- >Barriers to Learning
- >Classroom Climate
- >Classroom-focused Enabling
- >Environments that Support Learning
- >Learning Supports: Students to Succeed
- >Mentoring
- >Motivation
- >Parent/Home Involvement
- >Parenting Skills and Parenting Education
- >Prevention for Students "At Risk"
- >Resilience/Protective Factors
- >Social Promotion

>A Few Websites Dealing Directly with Dropout Prevention

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/> - National Dropout Prevention Centers
<http://www.focusas.com/Dropouts.html> - Focus Adolescent Services: Youth Who Drop Out
<http://www.ed.gov/programs/dropout/index.html> — School Dropout Prevention Program
<http://www.schoolengagement.org/> — National Center for School Engagement
<http://www.youthbuild.org/> — Youth Build USA

>And, if you can't find something you need, contact us directly (see info on page 12)

Some Related Reading

- Adelman, H.S.& Taylor, L.(2006), *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Belfield, C. & Levin, H. (2007). *The price we pay: Economic and social consequences of inadequate education*. Brookings Institution Press. <http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/2007/pricewepay.aspx>
- Bridgeland, J.M., DiIulio, Jr. J.J., & Morison, K.B., (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises. Online at <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/thesilentepidemic3-06final.pdf>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Dounay, J. (2008). Beyond the GED: State strategies to help former dropouts earn a high school diploma. Policy Brief, Education Commission of the States. <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/78/47/7847.pdf>
- Dynarski, M., Clarke, L., Cobb, B., Finn, J., Rumberger, R., & Smink, J. (2008). *Dropout prevention: A practice guide*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp_pg_090308.pdf
- Laird, J. Cataldi, E., KewalRamani, A. & Chapman, C. (2008). *Dropout and completion rates in the United States: 2006*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.
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- Steinberg, A. & Almeida, C. (2004). *The dropout crisis: Promising approaches in prevention and recovery*. Boston: Jobs for the Future. <http://www.jff.org/Documents/dropoutcrisis.pdf> .
- Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W., & Deci, E. (2006). Intrinsic versus extrinsic goal contents in self-determination theory: Another look at the quality of academic motivation. *Educational Psychology*, 41, 19-31.

Center Documents Relevant to Improving Schools to Prevent Dropouts

- >*School Improvement? . . . fully addressing barriers to learning and teaching is the next step!* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolimprovement.pdf>
- >*Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf>
- >*Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf>
- >*Community Schools: Working Toward Institutional Transformation* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/csinstitutionaltrans.pdf>
- >*Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School* – <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagingandre-engagingstudents.pdf>

Research into Practice
Dropout Prevention
Practice Guide



[Excerpts from *Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide* by Dynarski and colleagues*]

While individual strategies clearly can help a few students, the guide’s authors stress that “the greatest success in reducing dropout rates will be achieved where multiple approaches are adopted as part of a comprehensive strategy to increase student engagement.”

From this perspective, they state: “Engagement involves active participation in learning and schoolwork as well as in the social life of school. While dropping out typically occurs during high school, the disengagement process may begin much earlier and include academic, social, and behavioral components. The trajectory of a young person progressing in school begins in elementary grades, where students establish an interest in school and the academic and behavioral skills necessary to successfully proceed.

During the middle school years, students’ interest in school and academic skills may begin to lag, so that by ... high school, students ... may need intensive individual support or other supports to re-engage them.... Educators and policymakers need to consider how to implement intermediate strategies aimed at increasing student engagement.”

The guide offers six recommendations in the context of the following three categories:

- diagnostic processes for identifying student-level and school-wide dropout problems
- targeted interventions for a subset of middle and high school students who are identified as at risk of dropping out
- school-wide reforms designed to enhance for all students and prevent dropout more generally

The recommendations are as follows: The first “advises schools and districts to utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out... Increasing student engagement is critical to preventing dropping out. ...

Engagement includes both behavioral and psychological components. Attendance, class participation, effort in doing schoolwork, and avoidance of disciplinary actions (notably suspensions) are behavioral indicators of engagement, while interest and enthusiasm, a sense of belonging, and identification with the school constitutes psychological engagement. Both aspects of engagement have been associated with dropping out of school. Attendance in school activities and feeling a sense of belonging in the school community are both critical components of school engagement and should be addressed as part of dropout prevention or intervention strategies.”

Recommendations 2 through 4 suggest “targeting students who are the most at risk of dropping out by intensively intervening in their academic, social, and personal lives. ... Successful identification can permit the implementation of intensive targeted interventions.” Three complementary targeted recommendations are made, and the panel suggests using them together.

Recommendations 5 and 6 emphasize the need for “comprehensive, school-wide reform strategies aimed at increasing engagement of all students in school. These might be adopted in schools with unusually high dropout rates, where a large proportion of the student population is at risk. These recommendations recognize the fact that dropping out is not always or entirely a function of the attitudes, behaviors, and external environment of the students— that dysfunctional schools can encourage dropping out.”

Rec. 5 “provides strategies for personalizing the school environment ... to address the problem of anonymity and provide all students with a sense of belonging.”

Rec.6 “builds on this ... by encouraging schools to provide students with meaningful learning through a consistent emphasis on postsecondary opportunities.”

“When the school is part of the problem, recommendations five and six propose ambitious efforts to change the environment, curriculum, and culture of the school.”

[*Dynarski, M., Clarke, L., Cobb, B., Finn, J., Rumberger, R., & Smink, J. (2008). *Dropout prevention: A practice guide*. Washington, DC: USDOE. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp_pg_090308.pdf]

Focusing on Intrinsic Motivation to Re-engage Students

Psychological research over the last fifty years has brought renewed attention to motivation as a central concept in understanding learning and attention problems. This work is just beginning to find its way into applied fields and programs. One line of work has emphasized the relationship of learning and behavior problems to deficiencies in intrinsic motivation. This work clarifies the value of interventions designed to increase

- feelings of self-determination
- feelings of competence and expectations of success
- feelings of interpersonal relatedness
- the range of interests and satisfactions related to learning.

General Strategic Considerations

Activities to correct deficiencies in intrinsic motivation are directed at improving awareness of personal motives and true capabilities, learning to set valued and appropriate goals, learning to value and to make appropriate and satisfying choices, and learning to value and accept responsibility for choice.

The point for emphasis here is that engaging and re-engaging students in learning involves matching motivation. Matching motivation requires an appreciation of the importance of a student's perceptions in determining the right mix of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. It also requires understanding the key role played by expectations related to outcome. Without a good match, social control strategies can suppress negative attitudes and behaviors, but re-engagement in classroom learning is unlikely.

To clarify matters with respect to designing new directions for student support for disengaged students, below are four general strategies to think about:

Clarifying student perceptions of the problem – It is desirable to create a situation where students can talk openly why they have become disengaged. This provides an invaluable basis for formulating a personalized plan for helping alter their negative perceptions and for planning ways to prevent others from developing such perceptions.

Reframing school learning – For disengaged students, major reframing in teaching approaches is required so that these students (a) view the teacher as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (b) perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. It is important, for

example, to eliminate threatening evaluative measures; reframe content and processes to clarify purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences and underscore how it all builds on previous learning; and clarify why the procedures are expected to be effective – especially those designed to help correct specific problems.

Renegotiating involvement in school learning – New and mutual agreements must be developed and evolved over time through conferences with the student and where appropriate including parents. The intent is to affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options, enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. For the process to be most effective, students should be assisted in sampling new processes and content, options should include valued enrichment opportunities, and there must be provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

Reestablishing and maintaining an appropriate working relationship – This requires the type of ongoing interactions that creates a sense of trust, open communication, and provides personalized support and direction.

Options and Student Decision Making as Key Facets

To maintain re-engagement and prevent disengagement, the above strategies must be pursued using processes and content that:

- minimize threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to valued others

- maximize such feelings (included here is an emphasis on taking steps to enhance public perception that the school and classroom are welcoming, caring, safe, and just places)
- guide motivated practice (e.g., organize and clarify opportunities for meaningful application of learning)
- provide continuous information on learning and performance in ways that highlight accomplishments
- provide opportunities for continued application and generalization (e.g., ways in which students can pursue additional, self-directed learning or can arrange for more support and direction).

Obviously, it is no easy task to decrease well-assimilated negative attitudes and behaviors. And, the task is likely to become even harder with the escalation toward high-stakes testing policies (no matter how well-intentioned). It also seems obvious that, *for many schools, enhanced achievement test scores will only be feasible when a significant number of disengaged students are re-engaged in learning at school.*

All this argues for

- (1) minimizing student disengagement and maximizing re-engagement by moving school culture toward a greater focus on intrinsic motivation and
- (2) minimizing psychological reactance and enhancing perceptions that lead to re-engagement in learning at school by rethinking social control practices.

From a motivational perspective, key facets of accomplishing this involve enhancing student options and decision making.

A greater proportion of individuals with avoidance or low motivation for learning at school are found among those with learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems. For these individuals, few currently available options may be appealing. How much greater the range of options needs to be depends primarily on how strong avoidance tendencies are. In general, however, the initial strategies for working with such students involve

- further expansion of the range of options for learning (if necessary, this includes avoiding established curriculum content and processes)
- primarily emphasizing areas in which the student has made personal and active decisions

- accommodation of a wider range of behavior than usually is tolerated (e.g., a widening of limits on the amount and types of "differences" tolerated)

From a motivational perspective, one of the most basic concerns is the way in which students are involved in making decisions about options. Critically, decision-making processes can lead to perceptions of coercion and control or to perceptions of real choice (e.g., being in control of one's destiny, being self-determining). Such differences in perception can affect whether a student is mobilized to pursue or avoid planned learning activities and outcomes.

People who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through. In contrast, people who are not involved in decisions often have little commitment to what is decided. And if individuals disagree with a decision that affects them, besides not following through they may react with hostility.

Thus, essential to programs focusing on motivation are decision-making processes that affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. Special concerns here are:

- Decisions are based on current perceptions. As perceptions shift, it is necessary to reevaluate decisions and modify them in ways that maintain a mobilized learner.
- Effective and efficient decision making is a basic skill, and one that is as fundamental as the three Rs. Thus, if an individual does not do it well initially, this is not a reason to move away from learner involvement in decision making. Rather, it is an assessment of a need and a reason to use the process not only for motivational purposes, but to improve this basic skill.
- Remember that, among students manifesting learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems, the most fundamental decision often is whether they want to participate or not. That is why it may be necessary in specific cases temporarily to put aside established options and standards. As we have stressed, for some students the decision to participate in a proactive way depends on whether they perceive the learning environment as positively different – and quite a bit so – from the one in which they had so often experienced failure .

Reviews of the literature on human motivation suggest that providing students with options and involving them in decision making are key facets of addressing the problem of engagement in the classroom and at school (see references at end of this article). For example, numerous studies have shown that opportunities to express preferences and make choices lead to greater motivation, academic gains, increases in productivity and on-task behavior, and decreases in aggressive behavior. Similarly, researchers report that student participation in goal setting leads to more positive outcomes (e.g., higher commitment to a goal and increased performance).

Concluding Comments

Getting students involved in their education programs is more than having them participate; it is connecting students with their education, enabling them to influence and affect the program and, indeed, enabling them to become enwrapped and engrossed in their educational experiences.

Wehmeyer & Sands (1998)

Whatever the initial cause of someone's learning and behavior problems, the longer the individual has lived with such problems, the more likely s/he will have negative feelings and thoughts about instruction, teachers, and schools. The feelings include anxiety, fear, frustration, and anger. The thoughts may include strong expectations of failure and vulnerability and assignment of a low value to many learning "opportunities." Such thoughts and feelings can result in low and often avoidance motivation for learning and performing in many areas of schooling.

Low motivation leads to half-hearted effort. Avoidance motivation leads to avoidance behaviors. Individuals with avoidance and low motivation often also are attracted to socially disapproved activity. Poor effort, avoidance behavior, and active pursuit of disapproved behavior on the part of students are sure-fire recipes for failure and worse.

It remains tempting to focus directly on student misbehavior (see sidebar on the next page). And, it also is tempting to think that behavior problems at least can be exorcized by "laying down the law." We have seen many administrators pursue this line of thinking. For every student who "shapes up," ten others experience a Greek tragedy that inevitably ends in the student being pushed-out of school through a progression of suspensions, "opportunity" transfers, and expulsions. Official dropout figures don't tell the tale. What we see in most high schools in cities such as Los Angeles, Baltimore, D.C., Miami, and Detroit

is that only about half or less of those who were enrolled in the ninth grade are still around to graduate from 12th grade.

Most of these students entered kindergarten with a healthy curiosity and a desire to learn to read and write. By the end of 2nd grade, we start seeing the first referrals by classroom teachers because of learning and behavior problems. From that point on, increasing numbers of students become disengaged from classroom learning, and most of these manifest some form of behavioral and emotional problems.

We all have been heartened to see the shift from punishment to positive behavior support in addressing unwanted behavior. However, as long as factors leading to disengagement are not addressed, we risk perpetuating what William Ryan warns is the tendency to *blame the victim*.

From an intervention perspective, the key to engaging and re-engaging students in classroom learning is to focus on matching motivation. Matching motivation requires factoring in students' perceptions in determining the right mix of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. It also requires understanding the role played by expectations of outcome.

Without a good match, social control strategies can temporarily suppress negative attitudes and behaviors, but re-engagement in classroom learning is unlikely. And, without re-engagement in classroom learning, there will be no major gains in achievement test scores, unwanted behavior is very likely to reappear, and many will be left behind.

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



Motivation and Behavior & Learning Problems

All behavior-focused interventions must go a step farther and include a focus on helping teachers re-engage students in classroom learning

It is commonplace to find that when students are not engaged in the lessons at hand they tend to pursue other activity. Many individuals with learning problems also are described as hyperactive, distractible, impulsive, behavior disordered, and so forth. Their behavior patterns are seen as interfering with efforts to remedy their learning problems. As teachers and other staff try to cope with those who are disruptive, the main concern usually is “classroom management.” At one time, a heavy dose of punishment was the dominant approach. Currently, the stress is on more positive practices designed to provide “behavior support” in and out of the classroom. These include a focus on social skills training, asset development, character education, and positive behavior support initiatives.

The move from punishment to positive approaches is a welcome one. However, most of the new initiatives have not focused enough on a basic system failure that must be dealt with if improved behavior is to be maintained. That is, too little attention has been paid to developing a comprehensive system of learning supports that addresses barriers to learning and helps teachers re-engage students in classroom learning.

Student engagement encompasses not only engaging and maintaining engagement, but also *re-engaging* those who have disengaged. Of particular concern is what teachers do when they encounter a student who has disengaged and is misbehaving. In most cases, the emphasis shouldn't be first and foremost on implementing social control techniques.

What teachers need are ways to re-engage students who have become disengaged and resistant to standard instruction. The developmental trend in intervention thinking must be toward practices that embrace an expanded view of engagement and human motivation.

Although motivation has always been a concern to those who work with learning and behavior problems, the emphasis in handling these interfering behaviors usually is on using extrinsics as part of efforts to directly control, and/or in conjunction with, direct skill instruction. For example, interventions are designed to improve impulse control, perseverance, selective attention, frustration tolerance, sustained attention and follow-through, and social awareness and skills. In all cases, the emphasis is on reducing or eliminating interfering behaviors, usually with the presumption that the student will then re-engage in learning. However, there is little evidence that these strategies enhance a student's motivation toward classroom learning (National Research Council, 2004).

Ironically, the reliance on extrinsics to control behavior may exacerbate student problems. Motivational research suggests that when people perceive their freedom (e.g., of choice) is threatened, they have a psychological reaction that motivates them to restore their sense of freedom. (For instance, when those in control say: *You can't do that ... you must do this ...*, the covert and sometimes overt psychological reaction of students often is: *Oh, you think so!*) This line of research also suggests that with prolonged denial of freedom, people's reactivity diminishes, they become amotivated, and usually feel helpless and ineffective.

A comprehensive system of learning supports is essential to addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging students who have actively disengaged from classroom learning

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Stipek, D.J. (1998). *Motivation to learn: From theory to practice* (3rd ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Also, available at not cost from the Center, see:

>Unit B – “Engaging Students (and their Families) in Learning: Real and Valued Options and Decision Making” in: *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling* at: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/cfe.pdf>

>*Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School* <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagingandre-engagingstudents.pdf>

The Parable of the Policy Making Owl

A field-mouse was lost in a dense wood, unable to find his way out. He came upon a wise old owl sitting in a tree. "Please help me, wise old owl, how can I get out of this wood?" said the field-mouse.

"Easy," said the owl, "Fly out, as I do."

"But how can I fly?" asked the mouse.

The owl looked at him haughtily, sniffed disdainfully, and said, "Don't bother me with the details, I only decide the policy."

Moral: *Leadership involves providing details.*



Center Resources



The list of *Center Resources and Publications* is at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/selection.html>. Below are a few major works relevant to enhancing school improvement and personnel development from the perspective of addressing barriers to learning.

New

- *Community Schools: Working Toward Institutional Transformation* – Explores the concept of Community Schools – state of the art, guiding frameworks, processes of collaboration and moving forward
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/csinstitutionaltrans.pdf>
- *Moving Toward a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: The Next Evolutionary Stage in School Improvement Policy & Practice*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/paradigmshift.pdf>
- *Why School-owned Student Support Staff are So Important* – A one page resource for making the case. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/school-ownedstudentsupportstaff.pdf>
- *Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School* – Guide for practice highlighting matters fundamental to the challenges of student (and staff) disengagement and re-engagement. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagingandre-engagingstudents.pdf>

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

Center Staff:

Howard Adelman, Co-Director
Linda Taylor, Co-Director
Perry Nelson, Coordinator
... and a host of graduate and undergraduate students

Support comes in part from the Office of Adolescent Health, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Admin., U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services.

The solution to adult problems tomorrow depends in large measure upon how our children grow up today.
Margaret Mead

Want resources?

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Write: Center for Mental Health in Schools, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563

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For the latest on Center resources and activities, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> – click on *What's New*

Recently Updated

Center Briefs:

- *Mental Health of Children and Youth and the Role of Public Health Professionals*
<http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/publicpolicybrief/roleofpublichealthprofs.pdf>
- *Integrating Mental Health in Schools: Schools, School-based Centers, and Community Programs Working Together*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/integratingbrief.pdf>
- *Financing Mental Health for Children & Adolescents*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/FinanceBrief.pdf>

Guidebook:

- *Mental Health and School Based Health Centers*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/MHSBHC/wholemhsbc.pdf>

Technical Assistance Sampler:

- *Using Technology to Address Barriers to Learning*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Sampler/technology/techno.pdf>

Power Point Presentations:

- *Enhancing School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Reducing the Achievement Gap*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/presentations.htm>

