EducationWeek® | SPOTLIGHT®

2025

Student Engagement & Student Well-Being

Sonia Pulido for Education Week

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Student engagement and well-being are critical for academic success and overall development. This Spotlight explores strategies to create supportive and engaging learning environments that foster student motivation and well-being. From re-emphasizing the importance of play in kindergarten to leveraging the power of outdoor learning, these articles offer valuable perspectives. Discover how principals can create welcoming school environments and explore the factors that motivate students.

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Published January 27, 2025

Kindergarten Play Makes a Comeback, and Boys Benefit

By Elizabeth Heubeck

One November morning, a little after 8 a.m., Jessica Arrow and 14 of her kindergarteners are sitting in a circle on a rug in her classroom at Symonds Elementary School here.

Some sit cross-legged, others bounce up and down on their knees. Arrow is teaching math concepts using block-like structures called Cuisenaire Rods, which represent different numbers or groups of numbers through their colors and lengths. With a little coaxing, the students raise their hands to tell Arrow what she shows them—that the number 60 is made up of six groups of 10, or six orange rods.

One or two boys in the class fail to respond routinely to Arrow's questions, which are meant to test their conceptual knowledge represented by the colorful manipulatives. But that changes in a few minutes when she switches gears and has the students stand up and spread out. In this format, every student is locked in.

Projected onto a big white board in front of the room is Jack Hartmann, an "edu-tainer" who takes the students through a number of commands like "arm circles and count" and "twist and count"—which has the students following directions, using gross motor skills, and practicing counting out loud. By the end of the song, the students have counted to 100, and they look slightly exhausted. It's only 8:35 a.m.

Within minutes, the students pull out some hearty snacks from home (mostly yogurt, fruit, and cheese) and spend time eating and talking with classmates at their assigned tables before preparing for the most exciting part of the week: outdoor learning.

The morning has barely begun and, already, how Arrow structures her students' day looks far different than in most of the nation's public kindergartens today.

A federal push in recent years for greater academic rigor at increasingly younger ages has dramatically shifted the experience of kindergarten for most American children. Critics argue that such academic expectations for kindergarteners are developmentally inappropriate—especially for boys, who some experts say tend to mature more slowly than girls.

"The very thing that some educators and [creators of] educational policies think they're doing, which is ensuring that kids become able to think and read and do higher level—or what they think of as higher level—academic tasks, is actually thwarting them by not giving them a chance to do it the way that they need to do it when they're little," said Susan Engel, a psychologist and founding director of Williams College's Program in Teaching. "If you aren't given a chance to think the way you think best, which is with your body and with your voice in play, you're not going to think as well."

Sophie Park for Education Week

Kindergartener Brockton Lesser plays with a stuffed squirrel during forest play time. Learning outside gives children a chance to move their bodies and engage in meaningful play—both key for young boys in particular to thrive.

For an upcoming book project focused on kindergarten, Engel recently spent time in 29 kindergarten classrooms that spanned socioeconomic and racial demographics. There were some bright spots, Engel said, but overall, she was left with the impression that modern-day kindergarten is not meeting the needs of all students, especially boys.

"The majority of kindergarten classrooms I observed were repressive in a way that's going to be harder for a lot of boys than it is for girls," said Engel. Such classes maintained a rigid schedule and offered students very little time to socialize or jump around, she said.

"If you're a little boy and you're squirming around because at 5, you're likely to squirm and want to move your body and jump around, and you just don't have the impulse control not to—if you fail at that [impulse control] again and again, imagine what it does to your receptiveness to everything about school," Engel said.

In New Hampshire, play is once again the cornerstone of kindergarten

Meanwhile, Arrow has bucked the "academic rigor" trend and, instead, made deliberate changes to how she runs her class—infusing play, movement, and exploration into all aspects of learning. It's an approach in line with her state's vision for kindergarten.

In 2018, New Hampshire passed legislation requiring play to be reinstated as a cornerstone to public school kindergarten statewide. The decision—which says that kindergarten teachers should facilitate play-based learning that incorporates movement, creative expression, exploration, socialization, and music—is informed by the latest research on early childhood development.

Before heading outdoors, the Symonds kindergarteners reconvene on the rug, with Arrow sitting among them in the circle. She dives into a lesson on the autumnal behavior of squirrels, describing the nut-gathering and burying process in great, animated detail,

encouraging the students to mimic a squirrel digging a hole.

Arrow pulls out three stuffed animal squirrels—a mother and two babies—as visual aids, and repeatedly uses lively vocabulary words like "scurry" and "scamper" to explain the animals' behavior. Then she passes out an acorn to each student, instructing them to guard it carefully and bring it with them to the woods, where they'll bury it—just like squirrels do.

A little after 9 a.m., acorns in hand, the class heads outside to a clearing in the woods that abuts their school. Every week, they spend a dedicated hour to 90 minutes outside. It's not a free-for-all. The class joins in a circle, starting with a song about their surroundings. Then Arrow, using her stuffed squirrels, reviews the animal behavior she taught inside.

She tells the students it will soon be their turn to bury the acorns she handed to them earlier, and asks them to share with her where they plan to put them. Before they run off, in groups or by themselves, Arrow bellows, "Activate your squirrel power. Dig!"

After the students scamper like squirrels and bury their acorns in the dirt under the pine needles, they return to the circle to review some guidelines about free play, like how to safely carry sticks of different lengths, and Arrow suggests some ways the students might spend their pending free time. Then, before the students run off to either build forts with large fallen branches, create fairy houses with tiny sticks, or play a game that they make up, they each check in with Arrow and, again, share with her their plan.

Before long, some students have gathered around a stick that's a few inches wide around and much taller than they are. One boy is balancing on one end of it, while another boy bounces on it, trying to break it in half.

Arrow watches, doing a balancing act of her own. She's constantly weighing the risks versus rewards of letting children experiment with activities like this.

Some students take longer than others to decide what to do in the small forest space, where Arrow reminds them that wherever they choose to go, they must be able to see her at all times. One boy who, when inside, answered far fewer of his teacher's questions about math concepts than most of his classmates, was the first to share his plan of fort-building in the woods, quickly establishing himself as the lead fort-maker among a handful of classmates.

"Especially with boys, it's a pattern I often see: Those that struggle in the classroom thrive during choice time or in the forest," Arrow said.

Boys thrive during meaningful playtime

The kindergarteners are not just moving their bodies. They're also engaged in activities that 5-year-old boys see as meaningful—arranging branches to create a fort, hiding nuts in the forest to mimic a squirrel's behavior, or building something out of blocks.

"If you can tap into the why for boys, and the exciting benefits of learning, then they are buying into it," Arrow said.

Back in Arrow's classroom by 10:30 a.m., the students prepare for choice time. Students must pick the center where they want to play and see if there are openings (most are limited to two or three students). Once they reach their selected center—featuring pretend play, a doll house, a nature table, art supplies, blocks, books, and more—students problem-solve, negotiate, and get creative. For instance, the children decide who will play which role in the "pretend" corner, choose what to build with Legos or Play-Doh, and imagine what to create in the art center.

"Choice time is another period that allows children to be natural leaders," Arrow said. "They inspire each other. They teach each other."

It's also the best time to address statewide standards, Arrow believes.

"I often think to myself how much less practice the kids would get with these standards if we don't have this 45 minutes to an hour every morning [during choice time] to actually be utilizing and expressing verbally—especially for those students who aren't yet communicating as much verbally," she said. Boys, incidentally, tend to develop language skills later than girls.

Young boys may not be ready for a focus on academic rigor

Arrow said that early in her career, she felt the pressure that came with federal accountability measures and an emphasis on academic standards and standardized testing. Her days were full of worksheet dittos, direct instruction, and lots of redirecting. None of it felt particularly meaningful or developmentally appropriate, she said.

The standards-based reform movement of the past few decades have placed core academic standards at the center of an assessment-driven education environment, and the trickle-down effects have reached kindergarten—and may have, in particular, been a setback for young boys' learning development.

"Typically I see boys who are older being more successful in a modern, public school kindergarten where they're being asked to learn their letters and sounds and write their letters," Arrow said.

Her observations align with a growing number of child advocates who, like Richard R. Reeves in his popular book Of Boys and Men, recommend that boys start formal education a year later than girls.

"In the 21st century, elementary schools have changed in ways that seem to impact boys more than girls," said Timothy Davis, a psychology professor at the Harvard Medical School whose expertise includes boys and the current elementary school environment. "There has been a decrease in the amount of recess time. Boys seem to need more movement breaks than girls. Learning to read used to begin in 1st grade. Now it begins in kindergarten. Boys enter school behind girls in the area of pre-reading skills so they are disadvantaged by this change."

As a new teacher focused on standards and test scores, Arrow didn't feel particularly successful engaging her students, whom she felt she was constantly reprimanding.

"They looked unhappy," Arrow said. She felt unhappy, too.

That's all changed as Arrow has incorporated more movement, playtime, and outdoor learning into her classroom. She has found that letting young children engage in hands-on, experiential learning can be the most effective way to address academic standards.

Arrow, now in her 18th year at Symonds Elementary, serves as an example to her colleagues of how effective early learning can look different. The school administration has not only supported the changes to the way Arrow runs her classroom, but has encouraged her to share her methods with other teachers.

"Jessica has played an instrumental role in this entire district, helping educators to understand what play-based learning is, to bring it to life, and to keep it moving forward," Principal Susan Grover said.

Arrow also spreads her knowledge statewide; for instance, presenting on play-based coaching and teaching at summer workshops for the University of New Hampshire's Early Childhood Initiative. But her immediate concerns revolve around maintaining a classroom environment that allows all of her students to thrive.

As for the boys in her class, Arrow said, "I think they are feeling more successful in a classroom in which they can pursue their interests and discover their strengths." ■

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– Matt T. Principal, KY

The National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP®) is an in-school program designed to be a component of an HPE unit. It is aimed at improving educational performance among students in grades 4-12. Students learn focus, self-control, discipline, patience and lessons required to be successful in the classroom and in life. NASP® has proven to engage students who seldom connect with their school and to improve school culture. Since its inception in 2002, NASP® has put a bow and arrow in the hands of over 23.5 million students in 49 states and has also become a prolific club activity with local, state and national tournaments.

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National Archery in the Schools Program

Sam Mallon/Education Week

Students from Centreville Elementary School in Fairfax, Va., release brook trout that they've grown from eggs in their classroom at a creek in Fort Valley, Va

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Outdoor Learning: The Ultimate Student Engagement Hack?

By Elizabeth Heubeck

On any given day, you might find students from Centreville Elementary attending class at one of the school's 17 outdoor learning spaces, taking a nature walk, checking on the trout they've grown from eggs in a classroom tank, or working with classmates on how they can apply the most recent United Nations' sustainability goals to their own school community.

Centreville Elementary is not an alternative school; nor is it set in a remote corner of the country. Situated in suburban Fairfax County in Virginia, it's simply a public elementary school whose long-standing commitment to outdoor learning predates the pandemic—when many schools adopted outdoor learning as a way to return safely to in-person learning. Centreville Elementary has long had two permanent outdoor classrooms and treasured its tradition of participating in Trout in the Classroom, an environmental program that guides schools on how to raise trout and release them into the wild.

Joshua Douds, the school's principal, started the program at Centreville Elementary when he was a special education teacher under the leadership of then-Principal Dwayne Young.

"He [Young] had all the staff read the book No Child Left Inside. And he challenged teachers to spend an hour outside each day with their students," said Douds. "There were no stipulations. He just said, 'Get outside for an hour each day.' That's where the whole thing started."

Young retired in 2017, but his legacy of promoting outdoor education has taken root, and Douds believes the students are better off because of it. "We do a lot of informal surveys with kids. They often say that they love being outdoors and they feel cooped up in classrooms. They feel freer when they're able to investigate outside," he said.

Douds emphasizes that learning outdoors is not about simply teaching a math lesson outside: "Outdoor learning is when we're using the environmental objects to help teach the lessons."

He cites a math class learning multiplication outdoors, where students might count the weeds in a section of grass and use multiplication to determine how many weeds are in the whole field.

"They're looking at trees. They're looking at symmetry. They're looking at how different patterns appear in nature. They enjoy that. It incorporates nature into what they're doing. It ties it to real life," Douds said.

In many ways, outdoor learning stands in sharp contrast to the current educational system: heavy on standardized assessments, long hours spent in classrooms, and curricula that tend to lack direct links to experiential learning. These factors may be contributing to the problems facing K-12 education. Upward of 60 percent of America's high school students are chronically disengaged at school—meaning they are inattentive, exert little to no effort, do not complete tasks, and claim to be bored—according to the National Research Council.

Further, about 26 percent of K-12 students were chronically absent (missing at least 10 percent of a school year) in 2023, according to a report by the American Enterprise Institute. Amid these woeful statistics, outdoor learning presents a potentially attractive alternative, advocates argue.

Proof that outdoor play and learning reaps benefits

But in most schools in the United States, time outdoors, whether to play or learn, is a minimal part of the day and prone to disruption. Elementary school students spend an average of 25 minutes outdoors for recess daily, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What's more, in a 2018 survey of 500 elementary teachers, nearly 90 percent acknowledged decreasing or taking away recess time as punishment for bad behavior. That was the case despite a number of recent studies showing that kids who routinely play outside are "smarter, happier, more attentive, and less anxious" than kids who spend more time indoors.

In a systematic review of 147 studies on nature-specific outdoor learning experiences in K-12 educational settings, researchers sought to determine their effects on students' personal and social development, well-being, and academic progress. The range of outdoor learning experiences included curricular lessons in the local outdoor setting; working in school or community gardens; and adventure education. "Nature-specific outdoor learning has measurable socio-emotional, academic, and well-being benefits and should be incorporated into every child's school experience with reference to their local context,"

concluded the study authors, reporting in 2022 in the journal Front Public Health.

Overcoming obstacles to outdoor learning

Benefits notwithstanding, outdoor learning in K-12 schools remains the exception rather than the norm. Misperceptions and practical obstacles can get in the way, but advocates say solutions often exist.

Students who aren't accustomed to being outside for learning, for instance, may associate it with recess and behave accordingly. That problem can be remedied, supporters argue, if outdoor learning becomes routine.

But establishing that routine is less likely in U.S. elementary schools than elsewhere. A 2018 survey of more than 700 elementary teachers from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States found that American teachers were far less likely to take lessons outdoors than teachers from other developed countries; fewer than 30 percent of American teachers surveyed reported taking lessons outdoors even once a month.

Creative solutions can overcome practical obstacles to outdoor learning, such as space and funding limitations. Centreville's general budget does not support all the school's outdoor learning initiatives, for instance. But Douds said donations lend additional support, as do grants—something the school's outdoor learning specialist has become expert at identifying.

Further, not every school's campus provides an ideal backdrop for outdoor learning. In response, Douds encourages schools to think about how they can use their existing resources. They might grow a "green wall" indoors, for example, if conditions outside don't permit classes to sit amid flora and fauna.

Strategies for success: leadership 'champions' and student-driven initiatives

While the research showcases the benefits of outdoor learning, there's no specific template on how to make it happen. But the strategies that have allowed outdoor learning to become a permanent part of student life at Centreville Elementary, recently recognized as one of the Top Ten Green Schools in the nation, offer some sound ideas.

As Douds noted, having a principal who strongly encouraged teachers to find ways to incorporate the outdoors into every school day made it not only acceptable but desirable to take learning outside. That support has extended throughout the district.

In 2019, the Fairfax County governing board and the county school board formed the Joint Environmental Task Force, with an eye toward increasing student access to environmental stewardship opportunities and outdoor learning experiences. The Fairfax County school district expanded its commitment to outdoor learning by hiring outdoor learning specialists, or Get2Green leaders, at every one of its schools, beginning this school year.

Giving students choices and prominent roles in their learning tends to make them more invested in it. And, while Centreville acts on its commitment to exposing every student to outdoor learning, the school offers additional opportunities for students to get even more involved in related sustainability learning projects.

Centreville's Green Team is a prime example. Student members get to school 45 minutes early once a week and, under the guidance of a staff member, review current U.N. Sustainability Goals, propose adopting one of them for their school community, and then develop a proposal on how to apply it to their campus, Douds explained. Their efforts have resulted in the placement of bluebird boxes on campus, and they're currently working on a project in which they collect food not consumed at the school cafeteria and deliver it to a local food pantry or homeless shelter.

Douds emphasized the student-driven nature of initiatives like the school's Green Team, citing examples that include student members proactively scheduling meetings with him to discuss the projects they're advocating. "It's giving these kids a voice. And that is where true learning and advocacy come from," said Douds. "It's pretty impressive to see." ■

NASP® 2024 STUDENT SURVEY

52.5%

feel proud of the skills I have developed

"We've seen student success in those with physical, mental, and emotional disabilities."

– Marc S. Superintendent, MO.

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National Archery in the Schools Program

Published January 17, 2025

How These Schools Get Boys Excited About Learning

By Elizabeth Heubeck

By the time boys are 15, they are more than twice as likely than girls to express the sentiment that "school is a waste of time." And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

By most measures, boys have become increasingly disenchanted with school. Compared to their female classmates, boys overall get punished more, take on fewer leadership roles, and are less likely to finish high school on time. There are many potential reasons for this gender divide, but experts point to one overarching factor: The traditional school day is not aligned with how boys learn best.

"When almost 1 in 4 boys is categorized as having a developmental disability, it is fair to wonder if it is the educational institutions, rather than the boys, that are not functioning properly," wrote Richard V. Reeves in his landmark 2022 book, *Of Boys and Men*.

Across the country, educators and policymakers are starting to make changes to the school day to better serve students and their teachers. Many of those changes align with what research shows is best for the academic and social development of boys in particular: more movement, more hands-on learning opportunities, more choice and agency, and stronger student-teacher relationships.

For example, New Hampshire in 2018 enacted a law that play and exploration—not rigid schedules and heavy curricula—be central to public school kindergartens. Delaware recently instituted a robust redesign of its public schools' high school curriculum, boosting career-oriented coursework and experiential learning opportunities within several high-demand industries.

At the school or district level, change can be slow, stymied by insufficient funding and resources, entrenched systems of operation, or pushback from teachers, staff, and parents. But some schools are making positive changes for students a priority—and those newer norms are making boys more eager to get to school.

Jaclyn Borowski/Education Week

Students play in the creativity corner during recess at Boys' Latin School of Maryland in Baltimore. When schools offer students more independence and choice, boys in particular tend to thrive, experts say.

> **"When almost 1 in 4 boys is categorized as having a developmental disability, it is fair to wonder if it is the educational institutions, rather than the boys, that are not functioning properly."**
>
> **RICHARD V. REEVES**
> Author,
> *Of Boys and Men*

Education Week visited four schools last fall—the kindergarten of a public elementary school in New Hampshire, a progressive charter middle school in Charlottesville, Va., a traditional public high school in rural Delaware, and a private boys' school in Baltimore. Each school recently implemented research-informed changes—from relatively "low lifts" to complete reimaginings of the school day.

Though the schools' settings and student populations vary, they share one common feature: Educators at each school have kept students' well-being and engagement at the center of their decision-making process.

Not all of these changes were made to benefit boys specifically. But by encouraging student agency, linking learning to real-world applications, finding ways to incorporate movement into a packed schedule, and otherwise prioritizing students' needs, each school has found that boys are more motivated to come to school and learn. ■

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Published August 5, 2024

What Principals Can Do to Make Sure Students Feel Welcome at School

By Olina Banerji

Derrick Lawson, the principal of Indio High School in Indio, Calif., has a unique approach to the first week of school. He treats it like the first episode of a Netflix show he wants his students to binge-watch.

"The minute they step in through the door, I want to hook them so that they come back for more," Lawson said.

On the first day back, teachers take it slow, don't rush to introduce the syllabus, and play games that can help students to get to know their teachers and each other. A popular one at Indio High is a classroom version of beach volleyball. Each colored section of the ball features questions—like "pet's name" or "what movie would you like to act in?"—and students answer according to the section of the ball facing them when they catch it. Lawson said the games are an engaging way to break the ice, especially with students who are shy and feeling anxious about starting school.

School leaders have their work cut out as schools reopen this fall. As always, they must plan effective professional development for their teachers, review safety protocols, and finetune schedules. In the post-pandemic era, though, they have the additional responsibility to keep students engaged and excited enough to show up to school.

> **"The minute they step in through the door, I want to hook them so that they come back for more."**
>
> **DERRICK LAWSON**
> High School principal, Indio, CA

This means dealing head-on with student anxiety, which has become a contributing factor to students missing more school.

Student anxiety takes different shapes across grades. In high school, Lawson has noticed that students' initial euphoria about connecting with friends after school building closures has waned. It's been replaced by anxiety about fitting in.

"We see these problems arise because of social media. Online, [kids can] use filters. But when they have to see each other in person, it exacerbates their anxiety," Lawson said.

In middle school, both students and parents often feel anxious about the switch from elementary school.

"Parents worry about their kids getting lost. Students worry about operating their lockers," said Ashley Bowling, the principal of Florence Middle School in Florence, Ala.

New students are also afraid to stick out. "We only have two grades in our school," Bowling said. "Half our population every year is new. I have to convince them that it's OK to be the new kid."

Both Lawson and Bowling are intentional about addressing issues like student anxiety, apathy about learning, and a feeling of disconnectedness to the school community early in the school year.

The school leaders are trying to reduce their rates of chronic absenteeism—broadly defined as missing 10 percent or more of the total school days for excused and unexcused reasons—which has increased across the country. At Indio High, 38 percent of the student population of 2,090 was chronically absent in the 2023-24 school year. For Bowling's school in Alabama, with over 600 students, the rate stood at 16 percent.

"In middle school, you start seeing this apathy [toward school]. When the apathy is paired with poor attendance, students' grades decline," said Bowling, laying out a cyclical connection between chronic absenteeism and low grades. The decline in grades further discourages students from showing up to school.

"Then you're fighting two battles at one time," Bowling said.

Working on making students feel connected to school

To tackle the related issues of apathy and absenteeism, the two principals try to create spaces and provide opportunities that involve all kinds of students.

At Indio High, the first week back is a "club rush" for students to sign up to different extracurricular activities, get to know older members,

and the teacher mentors of these clubs. That Friday, there's a pep rally. The school also hosts movie nights and service projects like planting trees to keep students engaged in their first week.

Lawson has also made more structural interventions. He's created a student senate to give him feedback and recommend changes to school policies. Lawson tries to recruit a diverse group of students for the senate and is especially focused on those who seem disengaged.

"I ask them what can make them feel more connected. Having that opportunity makes students feel heard and valued. It's also crucial for them to see their views reflected in their peers," Lawson said.

It's also an investment in creating new student leaders, who can engage their peers more than the administration can, he added.

There is some indication that his efforts have borne fruit. The sign-ups for club rush week increased from 400 to 1,200 students this year.

Bowling started her back-to-school introductions in July, a few weeks before school starts. She hosted an all-day camp for students coming into 7th grade, where they got to tour the school, meet with teachers, and get accustomed to their new schedule. The camp day ended with a parent meeting to get them acquainted with the school and go over details like navigating a student's Chromebook at home.

Bowling has also set up an attendance task force to tackle absenteeism more directly.

"We think parents and guardians may not know what it means to be chronically absent, so we're approaching this educationally. We've created graphics that can help them understand what happens beyond a certain number of absences," she added.

Bowling held one session on the meaning of chronic absenteeism for parents during the camp but plans to talk about it again at orientation and feature it in newsletters throughout the school year. Plus, the task force will keep a close eye on which students are missing a lot of school and reach out to their families to address the problem.

Meeting all of students' needs

One key strategy to foster more connectedness, the principals said, is to recognize that students have a wide variety of needs.

This school year, Bowling will pilot an hour-long homeroom period, which is aimed at giving students extra academic support or time to work on their social-emotional skills. The interventions will be based on students' academic and behavioral data, and in the homeroom period, teachers will monitor how much progress their students are making on their individualized improvement plans.

The homeroom period will also help introduce students to different kinds of clubs, like a technology or cornhole club, beyond the regular ones like Future Business Leaders of America. The idea, said Bowling, is to show that every kind of student has a space in the school.

Bowling also wants to use this period to get feedback from students on what needs to be improved in the school's culture. She's dubbed it the principal's advisory group, akin to the student senate that Lawson has created.

April Knight, the principal of Avondale Elementary School in Columbus, Ohio, said taking care of students' more material needs, like providing backpacks, food supplies to take home, and meals in schools, can also reduce the barrier to attendance. Knight's school is in a high-poverty area, and families need the school's support, she said.

At the start of every school year, Knight hosts ice cream socials aimed at getting new families acquainted with the school.

And students with perfect attendance for a week get to be "principal for the day." They get a special name badge, a walkie talkie, and do classroom observations like principals. They also get to make one special decision, like giving everyone a longer recess.

"It's hilarious what kids think their principals do all day. But they're exhausted by the end of it," Knight said.

Principals want to work on their own leadership

Changing school culture and closing attendance gaps are tricky problems, and get more complicated every year. In addition to helping students, principals also need to develop their leadership skills to navigate through these challenges.

Knight said she wants to give better feedback to her teachers on their instructional strategies, like deliberative practice. "Students should be able to apply what they've learned," she said.

For Bowling, too, clear and effective feedback is the goal: "I have to learn that feedback comes from a good place and be more comfortable giving it because it adds value to our school."

Bowling, who's heading into her second year as principal, also learned to value her team and rely on them when she was going through a personal crisis in her first year as a school leader.

"At my lowest point, the school still ran, we still had quality education for the kids," she said. "It was 100 percent because of the team that surrounded me." ■

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67.9%

feel more connected to my school

"Archery is the most inclusive program we have with different economic backgrounds, races and family situations. I've never seen anyone say that 'that's not for me'."

– Jamie C. Principal, KY

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National Archery in the Schools Program

Published June 13, 2024

A Teacher Asked and Students Answered: What Motivates You to Learn?

By Arianna Prothero

iStock/Getty

Like most teachers, Dani Boepple devotes a lot of mental energy to devising ways to motivate and engage her students.

Motivation is a key part of learning—especially when students take on challenging material that requires more trial and error before the light bulb goes off. But what, precisely, sparks students' motivation can be elusive, even for the most seasoned educators.

Boepple teaches science at McDonald Middle School in the Dallas metro area, which serves mostly students from low-income families. Over the years, Boepple has honed multiple strategies and tested theories on how best to motivate adolescents to learn about everything from the movement of planets to the human impact on ocean ecosystems.

But to determine which of her tricks are most effective, Boepple recently decided to ask her students—about 150 of them—what they think she does as a teacher that is most motivating to them. Her students agreed on a list of Boepple's best motivational strategies. Here are four key ones she shared with Education Week.

1. Dive into the data

Top of her students' list is the deep dive into their achievement data that Boepple does with each of them. The teacher starts the year by going over students' achievement data from previous years, discussing where they are now academically, and setting goals for where they should be by the middle and end of their school year with her.

"They said that people don't really talk to them about their scores, they just tell them, Oh, you're behind,' but they don't know what that means," she said.

Boepple said she nurtures a growth mindset by rewarding students as they reach small goals along the way to those big ones.

2. Use rewards that leave a mark

Rewards—from stickers to pizza parties—are a tried-and-true way to coax students to perform their best.

But Boepple likes using personalized rewards that also acknowledge student success. She has a laser engraver in her classroom and for every big test her students take, if they do well enough on it, they get their name and the name of the test engraved on a wooden plaque. Boepple also decorates the plaques with engravings of stars, plants, or other designs that relate to the test material.

The plaques are displayed on a wall where students take selfies with them to share on social media. At the end of the year, students get to take their plaques home.

Boepple also makes custom "science mastery" stickers for her classes—a less expensive alternative to a laser engraver—that she gives to students when they meet their goals.

"I don't know why, but 8th graders love stickers. You would think that's a very elementary thing but it's not. They love to decorate their Chromebooks and their notebooks," Boepple said. "Then, if they get a perfect score on the exam, which is hard to do, because my exams are not easy, they get a perfect score sticker. There are a few of those floating around that are very prized."

3. Build a store stocked with aspiration

Students in Boepple's school wear uniforms, but they're allowed to ditch part of their uniforms if they are wearing college or military apparel. To leverage that as a tool for motivating students, Boepple constructed something she calls the "college closet," turning part of her classroom into a store stocked with shirts and sweatshirts bearing the names of different universities.

Students earn tickets for meeting their academic goals. They then can use those tickets to buy shirts Boepple has found from secondhand stores and through donations.

"If they wear a college shirt, they don't have to wear a uniform shirt, so that's the cool thing to do," Boepple said. "They said that really helps motivate them because they can't afford to go buy a nice college sweatshirt. They are so grateful, and they wear them every day with pride. And when you ask them, they'll say, 'Yeah, I earned this for mastering my test number three,' or they can tell you how they got the shirt."

4. Don't forget the hamster (or millipede)

Class pets are a staple in many K-12 classrooms. In her small, personal zoo that includes a hamster, turtle, snails, and a giant millipede, Boepple saw another opportunity to motivate her students: They can earn time to play with the class pets by finishing their schoolwork correctly on the first try.

"A lot of them have not held a hamster or seen a turtle up close," Boepple said, so the pets are a special—and highly motivating—treat. ■

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OPINION

Published May 31, 2024

What Students Want From Their Teachers, in Their Own Words

By Larry Ferlazzo

What has been your best experience in the classroom, and what action or actions did a teacher take to help you make it happen (if they did)? Please be specific. What can other teachers learn from this experience?

Be Considerate

Dayannie Espinoza is a junior at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.:

One of my best classroom experiences was my 9th grade PE class. This says a lot because physical education has never really been my best subject. I'm not athletic in the slightest and I'm not a sports person. However, my 9th grade PE teacher made my PE experience enjoyable.

My freshman year, I had PE first period, so you would expect that to be awful for me since it was bright and early in the morning. This teacher was very good at his job. He was chill but wasn't fully laid back to the point he let us do whatever we wanted. He still had set expectations for us, and it was his goal for us to reach them.

One thing I don't like is when teachers force us to do things that we genuinely don't feel comfortable doing. This teacher never really forced us to do anything we didn't want to do, but with his teaching methods, we never felt forced to do his work, we genuinely wanted to.

If there's one thing I've learned about being in a co-ed PE class with a bunch of boys, it's that they take everything as a die-hard competition. As someone who is willing to do the work but hates being judged by the boys if I didn't pass a ball well enough or was too slow, I loved the fact that my teacher had two separate groups for us. The try-hard group: the ones who genuinely enjoyed a sport and were supercompetitive and the noncompetitive but were still willing to do the work group.

We always had a choice in which group we wanted to be in and we still got points because either way we were participating and practicing our skills for that unit. I don't like having to always play sports and feel like my life depended on it, but my teacher freshman year made us feel comfortable in his class and didn't force us to, which I'm extremely grateful for.

I believe that teachers can learn to be more considerate of their students. I understand that this method may not work for all classes, but this is definitely what helped me pass this class and didn't make me dread going to class everyday.

Making A Connection

Jasmin Lopez-Hernandez is a 9th grader at Luther Burbank High School:

In my opinion, school is boring overall, but there is one class I never thought I would like, and that class is theater.

I'm pretty sure it might just be the teacher. She always has little activities in her class that she will make you do. The only difference is that she lets us do it at our own speed, she doesn't rush us like other teachers.

She doesn't seem like a teacher to us—she seems more like an older sister or like a friend but still have a lot of respect toward her.

I think trying to connect with your students gets your students to like you or just feel like you're there for them.

Starting Small

Sydney Syda is a junior at Luther Burbank High:

My best experience in the classroom is group work because it has improved my collaborative/community skills with others. One teacher made this happen by assigning a lot of group work and had us present in small groups, which is a good way to start off slow and made me feel more comfortable presenting in front of the class. We also slowly got to know other students without being forced.

Other teachers I had, they would speed through things and barely prepared us for anything, it was more of hurrying and getting things done, which was a lot harder to process and build relationships with them.

The things teachers can learn from this is that forcing students to share in front of the class all the time will not always help them get better but scare them and make them more anxious than how they were when they started.

Some people have a different pace when feeling comfortable expressing themselves, especially with a large group of people, so all this group work helps them slowly get to know one another and build a community.

At first, I didn't like the thought of presenting, but as I got to present in small groups, it has made me less fearful of presenting in front of the class. It has also helped me build a bond with my classmates and have comfortability, which I have always struggled with. Also, the way his class is structured and the positive attitude/environment he has for his students really plays a part in this. He is the only teacher who has ever made me feel comfortable speaking, and I have spoken more in his class than all my other years of school.

Patience

Omar Melchor is a senior at Luther Burbank High:

My best experience in the classroom probably had to be this year in 7th period (after-school) guitar class. I was having some fun playing some music with my friends and I can tell that one of my friends was struggling playing chords.

Then Mr. Green began telling my friend how he should position his fingers on the fretboard of his guitar. Though my friend struggled at first, he eventually got the hang of it. Though this experience wasn't happening directly to me, it was still a really good experience from a teacher since Mr. Green treated them with the utmost patience.

I remember Mr. Green saying that "everything takes its own time for everyone," and this quote stuck with me because it's something that I could apply outside of school and it could be on anything, not just music.

I believe that all teachers should have that level of patience for their students even if they can't grasp the material in their first try. Another thing that teachers could learn from this is that it's good to be adaptable. Not all students have the same skill sets so its good to be flexible around that.

Thanks to Dayannie, Jasmin, Sydney, and Omar for contributing their thoughts. ■

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

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NASP® 2024 STUDENT SURVEY

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OPINION

Published January 15, 2025

Student Motivation Is a Perennial Concern. What Are We Missing?

By Larry Ferlazzo

Many posts on student motivation have appeared in this blog over the years.

Antoine Germany, an assistant principal at the school where I teach, Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif., gave a brief presentation on the topic with a slightly different "take" on it from what I've usually heard.

At my invitation, he converted his thoughts into today's blog post.

Sonia Pulido for Education Week

'The Utility of Learning'

We, as educators, have all had students who don't regularly demonstrate their potential. Even more challenging are students who demonstrate little to no effort in your classroom.

These are the students who are frequently late, rarely, if ever, are prepared for class, and don't turn in work regardless of how many attempts you make to get them on track. These students can be challenging to work with and can oftentimes influence other students to begin to show less effort.

Countless books have been written about increasing student motivation. Although these books and the sentiments expressed within are well meaning, they often miss a fundamental understanding of motivation and its relationship to sustained effort, particularly when it comes to students.

Most seminars and books begin with the assumption that students demonstrate little effort because they lack motivation; so, we need to figure out ways to increase student motivation. The logic then dictates that we try to find motivational techniques or other incentives to motivate better academic behavior.

Even though this logic can be true in some instances, it is often not the case when it comes to students in an urban environment. Motivation is a feeling, a desire to do or be something. Effort is the actions taken to realize that motivation. They are not the same. In fact, you can be motivated, even highly motivated, and show little or no effort to realize that motivation.

> **"Stop assuming that they don't care and are unmotivated. The better way to view them is as students who need to develop better academic habits."**
>
> **ANTOINE GERMANY**
> Assistant principal,
> Luther Burbank High School

Many of us have experienced this in our own lives. We are motivated, sometimes highly motivated to lose weight or to eat healthier, yet we don't show much effort toward that goal. Why? There are a number of factors at play here that can help us understand and support our students.

Many students have never had the experience of their efforts (particularly in school) helping them attain their motivations to be a good student. Imagine trying for a few days or weeks to bring your grades up and you end up failing the class anyway or you don't do well on the next exam. This lack of concrete success can damper effort but not necessarily their motivation.

There's another factor at play as well, which is habits. Habits are formed over time, and poor habits have to be formed over time as well. This is often why we don't stick with diets or exercise regimes. We have to develop new habits to support the motivation that we have.

What does this have to do with our students with poor academic habits? The first is to stop assuming that they don't care and are unmotivated. The better way to view them is as students who need to develop better academic habits. The same way you learn poor habits is the same way you learn healthier habits. However, healthy academic habits are learned and should be taught.

When working with students who have displayed little effort, you should begin by showing and telling them that what they are doing in class is going to help them. We call this the utility of learning. We as educators can't assume that students are going to love learning just for its own sake; we have to tell students what they are getting better at and how this learning will help them in the future. Learning objectives displayed in the classroom are not just a perfunctory exercise in compliance, they are an opportunity to sell students on what they are learning and why it's important.

The other useful strategy to working with challenging students is to give them concrete,

incremental goals to achieve during the day. These goals might be as simple as being on time or having their writing utensil. Offering praise and affirmations when these students reach these incremental goals will connect the act with a positive result, which is often missing in students' minds.

Another idea is to give students a role or responsibility in class. If the teacher or the class is counting on the student to be there to fulfill their responsibility (whether it is to pass out papers or to collect exit slips), they are far more likely to demonstrate effort.

Displaying student work on the walls in the classroom (even if they have done very little) often shows students that the work they complete will be displayed and celebrated. They are far more likely to show effort to have more work shown. It's not dissimilar to practicing something with far more effort and precision when you know others are going to see the final product.

Giving students concrete feedback is also important. "Good job," although kind, is generic and doesn't get to the heart of what we are trying to achieve with students. Praising effort, however, is far more effective. "I like that you read silently for two more minutes today than yesterday. That sticking to it even when your mind starts to wander is the type of mental discipline that's going to make you a beast in my class." The second affirmation was specific and focused on sustained effort rather than a generic compliment.

Highlighting students' progress is also paramount when trying to help them develop better academic habits. Reminding a student of how far they've come reminds them that their effort has concrete results. It inspires more effort. It's just like working out and starting to see better results in your body. It reaffirms the effort put in and causes you to do more of it.

Finally, we should always remember that change takes time. Students are going to improve in fits and starts. They won't be perfect even with the strategies outlined above. But we can encourage better effort from our students by first ceasing to assume that they are unmotivated, by focusing on sustained effort through taught academic habits, and by giving students the same grace we would want when we are trying to change our own habits.

Thanks to Antoine for contributing his thoughts! ■

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