

**Inside the School**

# **Five Ways to Motivate Unmotivated Students**

By Joanna Marx-Talarczyk

## **Special Report**

# Inside the School

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# FIVE WAYS TO MOTIVATE UNMOTIVATED STUDENTS

“For some youngsters, there’s no belief that school is going to really make much difference for them in their lives and, so, they give up pretty easily,” Dr. Allen Mendler said. “Too often, unfortunately, we stay stuck with strategies that rely too heavily on leverage in order to motivate.”

According to Mendler, while there is nothing wrong with leverage, some students don’t much care about the things that teachers do to leverage them. A timeout only works if a student prefers time-in and a zero on an assignment only works if that student is already motivated and achievement oriented.

Allen Mendler, Ph.D. is an educator and school psychologist who has worked with students of all ages in regular education and special education settings as well as juvenile detention. His emphasis is on developing strategies to help difficult youth succeed. Here are five ways teachers can motivate unmotivated students beyond traditional leverage from Mendler’s seminar *Motivating Unmotivated Students*

## **EMPHASIZE EFFORT AND PRAISE MISTAKES**

Mendler described a classroom where he observed a class of low achievers. These students came unprepared, collected zeros on assignments, were quick to challenge authority and, according to Mendler, had a need to show that they didn't care about school.

"Yet they behaved very, very differently with Ms. Jackson who was the Social Studies teacher," Mendler said. "She, for example, made each of her students actually feel good about making mistakes."

According to Mendler, Jackson returned an assignment to a student who received a 60 percent. She pointed out which questions he answered correctly and praised him. When it came to the incorrect answers she said that she must not have taught those topics very well and promised to go over them at the beginning of class.

"What was really interesting was that I noticed that in her class, turned-off students were much more highly motivated," Mendler said. "I know of another teacher who regularly thanks her students for making errors that others can learn from."

## **CHALLENGE A FAILURE MENTALITY**

Teachers need to reach out to the students who have negative conversations with themselves.

“Probably 85 percent of the conversations that we, as well as kids, have every day is with ourselves,” Mendler said. “So, for example, with those kids that are regulars at the: ‘I can’t, it’s too hard, it’s too difficult, I tried, but I failed,’ we’ve got to challenge that on a regular basis.”

Teachers should recognize when students struggle, praise their efforts and point out that even if they don’t get it right away, they can always do better. Teachers should also remind students that they will neither give up on them nor let them give up on themselves.

## NOTICE AND BUILD ON STRENGTHS

Reinterpret students' weaknesses into strengths. Instead of seeing a student who doesn't do anything or is set in his own ways as lazy, consider him to be strong-willed or determined.

"If you think about kids as lazy, it's kind of hard to feel motivated as a teacher [...] to want to keep trying to motivate them," Mendler said. "If you could make that shift, the sort of mental shift, from seeing a student, who does very little, as lazy, to somebody who is strong willed, it could lead to a very, very different reaction from us that might motivate some enthusiasm in the student and even some compliance."

A teacher can explain to the student, Louise in Mendler's example, that she is very strong willed and that quality is valuable in life, like when someone wants her to take drugs, but that it's hard for the teacher to know whether or not she's doing a good job teaching when Louise won't do any of her homework.

## **REDO. RETAKE. REVISE.**

Give students more than one chance to do an assignment whenever possible. If teachers worry that the students won't give an assignment their best on the first try, they can enact a small penalty like a slight grade reduction.

"There also needs to be a message to kids that says 'I believe in you and I am not going to give up on you. I'm not going to accept mediocrity from you,'" Mendler said. "I think our job is to throw roadblocks and obstacles in the way of some determined students' efforts to try and fail.

According to Mendler, a lot of students will take teachers up on the offer to redo an assignment.



## CONNECT WITH STUDENTS

Greet students with high fives at the door, apologize when necessary or send home birthday cards, according to Mendler, these little things can make a big difference.

“One of the things that I used to do when I was teaching, I kept a picture of myself at the same age as my students,” Mendler said. “That really blew their minds because they just could never imagine that an old guy like me was ever really young like they are.”

With students who shut down and have hard time connecting, teachers can also use a two-minute intervention where a teacher takes two minutes a day for ten days to get to know a student. She can talk to that student about anything which doesn't pertain to discipline or motivation.

These five tips can help teachers motivate students who are hard to motivate. Emphasizing effort and praising mistakes, challenging a failure mentality, noticing and building on strengths, giving students another chance and connecting with students are ways in which teachers can unlock enthusiasm in their least motivated students.

“Most problems with behavior and motivation really do have their root causes in places and factors outside of school,” Mendler said. “We really have to commit to maximizing the 10, 20, maybe 30 percent of that influence that's ours to really influence their behavior.”



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