



## Developing Self-Motivated, Lifelong Learners

Teachers want their students to be ready to learn and determined to overcome their own challenges; unfortunately, educators may be unsure about how to make this happen. According to the experts, teachers can take several steps to encourage students to take ownership of their learning.

The best place to start is by understanding students' motivation. "Even the kids we describe as unmotivated are motivated," says Bob Sullo, an education consultant and former teacher and school administrator. "They may be motivated to talk with a friend, to disrupt your class, to sleep, or to text a friend in another class. But make no mistake—they're highly motivated."

In his ASCD book *The Motivated Student: Unlocking the Enthusiasm for Learning*, Sullo writes that in order to engage young people in lessons, teachers must allow them to connect

with one another; develop increased competence; make choices; and enjoy themselves in a safe, secure environment. "When students satisfy their needs by immersing themselves in the productive academic challenges you create, they will behave appropriately and perform better," says Sullo.

For each planned activity, Sullo recommends teachers ask themselves three questions:

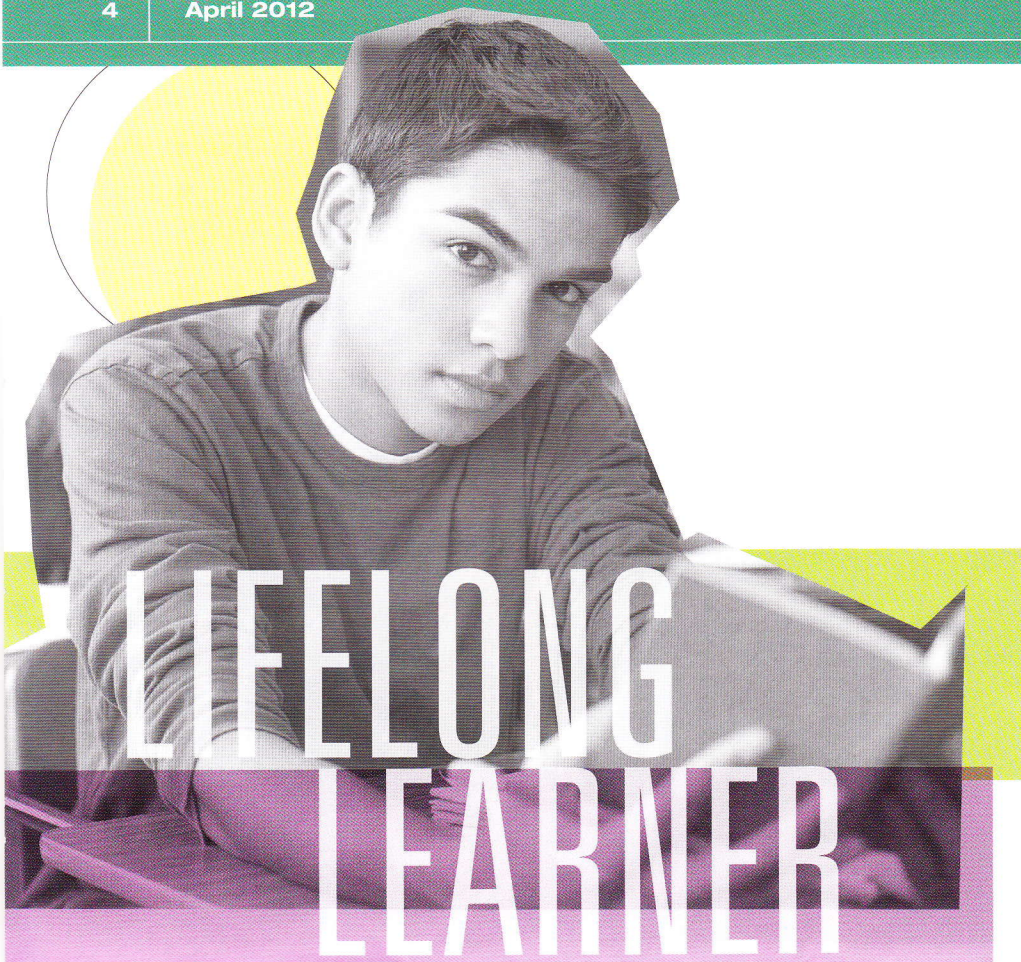
1. If the students do what I ask them to do, will they be able to satisfy the need to connect/belong?
2. If the students do what I ask them to do, will they be able to have some choice, allowing them to responsibly meet the need for freedom?
3. Do I believe the students will enjoy this activity?

Although it's not important to answer "yes" to every question for each

activity, Sullo advises that teachers look at all the activities they are asking students to do and realize that when students' needs aren't being met, they will typically fulfill them their own way, and one should expect more disruptions and less learning.

Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, professor emeritus of psychological sciences at the University of Northern Colorado and author of *Human Learning and Educational Psychology: Developing Learners*, says teachers need to give students strategies to encourage them to become self-motivated learners. Don't just tell them to read 10 pages of a book, she says; instead, give them questions to think about as they read. This will help them to focus and connect with the material.

Some children develop negativity about learning because they've never been taught some of the basics that



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many of us take for granted. David Ginsburg, an education consultant who worked in urban schools for 17 years, had to teach his students how to get organized. Many didn't even know how to take notes, he says. After Ginsburg gave his students a system for note taking and encouraged them to use their notes on his quizzes, the students began experiencing success, which led to more positive attitudes.

"We need to set students up for success, to stop enabling the self-defeating behavior by coaching [them] and providing resources to [help them] overcome that behavior," says Ginsburg. "Whether they are successful or they fail, they need to take credit. We can set the tone by

acknowledging our own fallibility and modeling the right behavior."

Teachers should also demystify the learning process, says Robyn Jackson, an education consultant, former teacher, and author of *Never Work Harder Than Your Students*. "We need to take the soft skills that go into [learning] and show them to our students," she says.

For Jackson, this message hit home when she was still teaching. She struggled with being on time to places,

and time-management techniques did not work for her. After reading an obscure paragraph that said people don't understand how long it takes to do things, Jackson began timing her trip to work and discovered that what she thought took 5 minutes actually took 12 minutes. When her students didn't finish reading a novel on time, she wondered if they too were underestimating the time required. She timed them reading in class so they could determine how long it would take to read the novel. The next time they had a book to read, all but three kids finished on time, says Jackson.

"I had never thought to teach that piece, but it is a huge issue," she says. "We assume they know the soft skills, but they can't take ownership of their learning if they are missing essential components."

Jackson says rigor is another key element for encouraging student ownership of learning. "When I teach you how to think about the material, you can't own it. And if you don't own it, you haven't mastered anything." Instead, it's important to help children learn how to process information and own it.

Equally important is helping children believe in themselves. "If you believe you have the ability to do something, you're more likely to want to do it and to do it," says Eric M. Anderman, director of the School of Educational Policy and Leadership and an educational psychology professor

## → MINING THE RESEARCH

Although many middle schools sell soft drinks, candy, and other "junk food," a recent study concludes that selling foods like these at school may not necessarily affect student obesity. Read *Competitive Food Sales in Schools and Childhood Obesity: A Longitudinal Study* and other recent reports at [www.ascd.org/miningtheresearch](http://www.ascd.org/miningtheresearch).

at The Ohio State University. “A lot of reasons kids get turned off is that they develop a belief that they’re not good at something, whether it’s writing or learning a foreign language or playing sports.” Teachers have to get kids to believe they have the ability. One way to do this, suggests Anderman, is

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to set short-term, reachable goals so students can feel proud about their accomplishments. Never start with something that doesn’t allow students to experience success.

Anderman also notes that kids need time to succeed. He believes timed tests or assigning work to do in a certain amount of time is frustrating. “Some simply need more time,” he says, “or they get stressed, don’t finish, and feel unsuccessful. If we bend the rules

a bit more and give them the time they need, they will experience success and be more engaged.”

Finally, many of the experts say that children have to be allowed to make—and learn from—their mistakes. Kids who simply replace wrong answers with the right ones never

learn what went wrong. “You can’t erase your own thought and replace it with someone else’s because you won’t understand the connection between where you went wrong and how to get the right answer,” says education consultant Allison Zmuda, author of *Breaking Free from Myths About Teaching and Learning: Innovation as an Engine for Student Success*.

Dale Schunk, a professor in the department of teacher education and

higher education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, agrees that mistakes can be informative if the child focuses on what to do to make it better the next time. “If a child is using the wrong strategy, a teacher can say something like, ‘Why do you think you’re having a problem with this?’ or ‘Why don’t you try this method and see if that works better?’”

Schunk encourages teachers to help the child understand that if the problem is something he or she can change, such as effort, strategy, or time on task, it may lead to a better outcome next time. The problems arise when the student attributes a mistake to something he or she can’t change—for example, “I’m not smart enough” or “I can’t do this.” When that happens, says Schunk, teachers need to tell students, “Yes, you can do this! Let’s try a different method and I think the outcome will be better.” **EU**

—ELLEN ULLMAN



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