

Keeping Current

Research-Based Ideas for Teachers from the Editors of *Better Teaching*®

Motivating Students

Experts say that teachers hold the key when it comes to motivating students—to instilling the interest in and excitement for learning that causes students to work, explore and take risks in the classroom.

Meet your students' basic needs

All students have some basic needs. When teachers recognize and respond to these needs, their students will be more motivated to work and to achieve. Students need to:

- **Be understood.** Show students that you consider their opinions, interests and concerns when you make decisions that affect them.
- **Feel appreciated.** Reward achievement and consider how you acknowledge mistakes. Unconstructive criticism—especially in front of peers—may have a negative impact on motivation.
- **Feel validated.** Reward student effort as well as student success. Let students know you have faith in their capacity and ability.
- **Have a sense of self-esteem.** Set reasonable, achievable goals for your students. Let them know what your expectations are for them, and let them know you believe they can meet those expectations.
- **Be challenged.** Students respond to challenge. Challenging and engaging teaching includes subject matter that relates to student interests.



- **Feel accepted.** Treat all students as valued members of the classroom community; don't single out or ignore certain students or reward only the high achievers.

Hold high expectations

The beliefs that teachers hold about teaching and learning—and the expectations they hold for their students—are powerful things. Simply put: Students expect to learn and are motivated to do so when their teachers expect them to learn.

Use extrinsic and intrinsic motivation

The use of extrinsic, or external, motivators such as rewards and special privileges can be an easy way to motivate students. However, according to research, students who are encouraged to think about stickers, treats or even grades may become less inclined to explore ideas, think creatively and take chances. That's where intrinsic motivation—when students are actively engaged in learning “for learning's own sake” rather than for external rewards—comes into play.

For the best results, use a combination of both. For example:

1. **Encourage students to reinforce** their own progress with self-statements such as, “Now I really know what I am supposed to do.”
2. **Make sure the extrinsic rewards** you use are linked to improved

performance or mastery (no math homework as a reward for a perfect score on the math quiz, for example).

3. **Increase the use of specific, meaningful praise** that will help to build student self-confidence. Make an extra effort to catch students doing things successfully. (“Juan, that's exactly how we should handle the microscope. Good job!”)

Check your classroom climate

According to the research, there are six factors that, when present in the classroom, can make students want to learn. Check to see that they exist in your classroom:

- **Students feel safe**—from both physical danger and from embarrassment.
- **Students believe** that what they are doing has value.
- **Students experience success.**
- **Students are involved.** They have a stake in what they're doing.
- **Students know you care** about them.
- **Students feel enabled** to learn.

Be proactive

According to some researchers, teachers who are effective at motivating students tend to have proactive teaching styles. They are positive, flexible and non-authoritarian. These teachers:

- **Understand their students** and use this understanding to guide their own behavior.
- **Are more concerned** with how their students respond to their teaching effort than with the methods or approaches they use.

Use dress rehearsals

Use the concept of a “dress rehearsal” to motivate students to take learning risks. If a student’s work is high quality at the time of the dress rehearsal, there’s no further obligation. Otherwise, the student must continue to refine his work until the final due date.

Use cue words to focus on intrinsic appeal

Almost all subject matter, regardless of what it is, has intrinsic appeal. It’s just a matter of focusing your students’ attention in the right direction. The more appealing you can make the content, the more likely you will be to capture student interest and increase motivation to learn.

Following are a few intrinsic appeals that can be found in almost any subject matter. Use cue words to help your students recognize them.

- **Novelty.** Novelty is the opposite of routine. It arouses curiosity and engages the imagination. *Cue words:* “I’ll bet you’ve never met anyone like the characters you’re going to meet in this short story.”
- **Surprise.** Surprise is an unexpected turn of events. For example, an early elementary science project involving growing seeds often can elicit surprise at the changes that occur in the tiny plants. Once one surprise occurs, students might wonder if there will be more surprises, which can serve as a cue for the next appeal. *Cue words:* “Wait until you see this!” “You won’t believe this.”
- **Anticipation.** Anticipation appeals to curiosity and suspense (what’s going

to happen next). *Cue words:* “Be sure to watch for” “Can you figure out how to ... ?”

- **Security.** The security appeal in a lesson reassures students that it is safe to engage in the subject matter. *Cue words:* “You already know” “This is like what we did when”
- **Challenge.** Challenge can be a very effective motivating factor. The trick is to make sure the challenge is neither too difficult nor too easy. *Cue words:* “Do you think you can ... ?” “Why do you think that ... ?” (Be sure not to confuse intrinsic challenges with “polite” commands such as, “Do you think you can write the topic of this lesson on your papers now?” or extrinsic challenges such as “I’ll bet you can solve this equation.”)

Increase motivation through empowerment

Another good way to motivate students is to give them a sense of empowerment—a sense that they can help make the choices in the classroom. When students feel they have a choice—when they can help to make some of the decisions regarding what they are doing—they will more likely be motivated to do the work.

Here are a few ways that you can empower, and motivate, your students:

- **Learning contracts.** Learning contracts, written agreements between student and teacher that clearly define expectations and rewards, are a good way to involve students in individualizing instruction and making them part of the process.
- **Setting goals.** Ask your students to write down their expectations for themselves and review them together on a regular basis.
- **Active involvement.** Use small-group and peer-led activities that

allow students to demonstrate leadership and initiative.

- **A menu of assignments.** Identify learning objectives and generate a menu of assignments that will satisfy the objectives. Then, allow your students to choose the assignments they want to do from the menu.

Make praise meaningful

Praising students can be a good thing to do. However, the research shows that, when overused or used inappropriately—praising students effusively or for such routine tasks as handing in homework or having a neat desk, for example—praise can be harmful.

Here are some basic strategies you can use to make praise meaningful:

- **Make sure praise includes comments** about specific actions rather than a student’s broad competencies or skills.
- **Praise students with statements** that do not imply they must be intelligent or have high ability in order to succeed.
- **Give students specific criteria** (rubrics, developmental continuums, etc.) they can use to evaluate (and praise) their own progress.
- **Make sure that the praise you give** one student does not have the potential to damage the self-esteem of others.

Set a good example for your students

Actions speak louder than words. Make sure your students see you modeling motivation and interest in learning. Show them that you value learning new things, gaining new skills and considering new ideas.