
What Teachers Don't Get About 'Low-Performing' Students

New America Media, Commentary, Yvette Jackson, Posted: Nov 20, 2011

All students should have the chance to be motivated to achieve in ways that are usually expected of those students labeled “gifted,” but that’s not the case. Often educators and parents feel a sense of hopelessness in the ability of our leaders to enact policies that can transform public education.

What has been ignored in policies that attempt to address underachievement is the focus on the individual. Instead, there has been a proliferation of practices that lump students together into programs of generalized instruction, as if all the causes for the underachievement are the same.

While the learning process is pretty much the same for all of us, what ignites learning and stimulates that learning to the point of achievement is different for everyone.

We are all born with an intrinsic desire to learn. Just go into any school around the country right now and watch kindergarten students of any background enter school and you will see children excited with anticipation.

They anticipate having their inner drive to learn quenched and want to collect on the promise made to them by their parents that in school they would learn and be motivated to succeed.

However, as Dr. James Comer, who teaches child psychology at Yale, illustrates, motivation from academic success is an acquired taste. In other words, students are motivated to achieve academically by the identification and development of their interests through enrichment and through opportunities to research and apply their learning in stimulating and

authentic ways.

Those who create programs for students labeled as gifted get the point about how to motivate achievement in school. But for students in schools tagged as “low performing,” their anticipation is quickly squelched by tests that identify under-developed skill areas, which in turn become the overwhelming focus of their instruction. This often leads to the exclusion of instructional approaches that stimulate their interests, strengths, or engagement.

Instead, school is repetitive, boring, and lacks enrichment. This cycle leads to failure and the harshest punishment of all: Many students never experience success in school and their motivation for academic success is extinguished.

All students can experience school as a place where they can learn, grow, and be successful, but that takes bold direction from the local to the state and federal levels.

Leaders must understand that individual student interests and abilities have to be addressed, engaged, and supported.

This understanding is critical if our students are going to meet the promise of the new Common Core State Standards to be college and career ready. The standards require student engagement so they are motivated to be confident as self-directed learners.

The question for policymakers willing to go down this path is: how will they help all students develop the acquired taste for academic success?

Two major shifts would transform how we motivate

<http://newamericamedia.org/2011/11/what-teachers-dont-get-about-lowperforming-students.php>

What Teachers Don't Get About 'Low-Performing' Students

academic achievement.

*First, change the expectation for all students to that of intellectual development and self-directed learning and not just literacy skills. Instead of focusing on underdeveloped skills, change assessment to identify students' strengths and focus on individual learning growth. This growth would be indicated through an increase of strengths and a decrease in under-developed skills.

Districts must detail how they will give teachers the flexibility to create practices that provide enrichment and promote self-directed learning that uses students' strengths to build their skills. Professional development should help teachers activate, guide, and assess the learning process. This would include exploring and adapting the latest research from cognitive and neuroscience.

*Second, policies should reflect the understanding that self-directed learning requires investment, ownership, and responsibility from students. This ownership would be established through individualized plans for student-generated, teacher-guided learning goals. The goals would include identification and application of student interests and strengths for meeting instructional outcomes; identification of skills to be developed; and opportunities for mentoring, tutoring, and/or internships.

These two goals alone would change two pernicious policies. One is the elimination of the term "achievement gap." This term has fostered measuring the distance in achievement between races as opposed to addressing the growth of individual students to close the gap between their potential and their achievement. The second is shifting away from the practice of using tests that provide a snapshot of where students are at a particular time.

That status quo would be replaced by dynamic

approaches that encourage students to work with teachers to assess their own growth through their responses, classroom work, and other instructional opportunities.

These changes not only transform how we "do school" but they ensure that students experience individual success that builds their taste for self-directed learning and academic achievement. It is in such change that we can find true hope for transforming how we do school and where we will find concrete ideas to act on this hope.