Re-engaging Students: Using a student's *time off* in ways that *pay off!*

For school staff and students the winter break is a welcome time for rest and relaxation.

It is also a valuable opportunity for appreciating what we have accomplished in the first part of the school year, facing the fact that there are some problems that need to be addressed, and anticipating a fresh start in the new year.

We began the school year in September with a focus on Welcoming Students and their Families; in October we looked at strategies to help with school adjustment; in November we explored procedures for more effective referrals including strategies for talking with kids to better understand the motivational bases of problems.

By December, school staff and students know that for some students "it isn't working."

Since giving up is no option, we need to focus on *re-engagement.*

Remember "burn out" of school staff and students
is grounded in intrinsic motivation.

In particular, staff feel discouraged when we experience a lack of success with students. It threatens our feelings of competence and makes us feel disconnected from the kids we mean to help. And, it can lead to feelings that we aren't really in control of our work.

December is a time for mid-course corrections to turn this all around. A time to think how we might do things differently to get the results we want.

> As Winnie the Pooh says (while Christopher Robin is dragging him by his heel downstairs and his head is bumping on each stair), "I think there is a better way to do this if only I could stop bumping long enough to think of it."

School breaks provide the time to stop bumping and try to re-engage students who seem to have become rather disengaged from classroom learning (and are finding other, often disruptive, ways to spend their time at school.)

For support staff and teachers , the following are some ideas to use to start to turn things around before winter break and to follow-up with immediately after students return.

The first step is for support staff and teachers to establish the kind of working relationship that is motivated by the desire to (a) understand the causes for students' lack of engagement and difficult behavior and (b) try some different strategies.

While the initial focus may be on a particular student, move toward thinking more generally about that student as one of a type who experiences learning or relationship problems and how changes in strategy would benefit as many as we can. That makes the potential pay off much greater.

Ask *WHY?* Why are some students not engaged in classroom learning? Why are they misbehaving? Real pathology as the cause is relatively rare. Factors away from school can be barriers, but at this time, we should focus on some of the common school-related reasons. These include:

> C   not experiencing sufficient success in learning, so they give up;

> C   not having a good relationship with the teacher, so they react/resist;

> C   not having connected with a supportive group of friends, so they feel isolated/alienated.

Worse yet, a few students may be experiencing a lack of success related to all three matters.

Any of the above can set a negative cycle into motion. And, once students have a negative image and reputation, we are all in trouble.

SOME THINGS TO DO BEFORE AND AFTER WINTER BREAK

(1) INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES BEFORE THE BREAK: Schools need to assist teachers at this time of year by facilitating time for them to conference individually with each student who has been having problems. In some cases, the student's parents need to be included. The focus is on how to use the time before and through the winter break as a period for renewing positive relationships and re-engaging the student in classroom learning. Student support staff can play a role in arranging such conferences and then covering the teacher's class while the teacher holds the conferences. The discussions should cover (a) why there has been a problem (without getting into a "blame-game"), (b) exploring some new ways that the student thinks could make things better for all concerned, and (c) arriving at some mutual agreements (not one-way "contracts").

(2) IMMEDIATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE OF IMAGE: For students who have acquired a negative reputation, it is critical to develop some immediate opportunities for them to take on some attractive, positive roles (e.g., team captain, special monitor, photographer for the school newspaper, part of the design group for the school's website).

(3) ADD SOME EXTRA CARING SUPPORT: Use volunteers, aids, and/or other students to provide additional support to these specific students. Make certain the tone is one of caring not censure and that the support provides real opportunities to discover the value of learning and not another monitoring device.

(4) POSITIVE ACTIVITIES OVER THE WINTER BREAK: While it would be good if these students could use the break to catch up on missing skills, the greater pay off will come if families focus on enhancing motivation for school. A strategy for this is for the teacher to outline for students and families some fun activities (e.g., intrinsically motivating projects) to do over the break. These should be ways to build on the new classroom activities that have been designed to re-engage the students. Such activities can consolidate something that has been learned recently or lay a foundation for future learning (e.g., school reading and writing projects), especially activities that are planned for re-engaging the students after the break Examples include involving students in (a) carrying out special roles related to holiday events, (b) taking pictures while on trips to special places and later bringing them to school to include in learning activities (e.g., writing stories), (c) choosing videotapes that teach as well as entertain, and so forth.

(5) FIRST DAY BACK: This is the time for support staff and teachers to take special steps to individually greet and welcome back these students and be prepared to help them re-engage in positive activities and learning. Again, use volunteers, aids, and/or other students to provide extra support. *Make them feel cared about and positively special.*

(6) KEEP IT UP UNTIL IT PAYS OFF.

>>Some points about: *Students who have not been successful in learning the material taught.*

It could be motivational or a lack of readiness skills or????.

"Successful, engaged learners are responsible for their own learning. These students are self-regulated and able to define their own learning goals and evaluate their own achievement. They are also energized by their learning, their joy of learning leads to a lifelong passion for solving problems, understanding, and taking the next step in their thinking. . . . In order to have engaged learning, tasks need to be challenging, authentic, and multidisciplinary. . . . The most powerful models of instruction are interactive. Instruction actively engages the learner..."

From: *Designing Learning and Technology for Educational Reform* (1994).
Jones, et al., North West Regional Educational Laboratory.

What changes could be made in classrooms, with the help of support staff, special ed., and administration that would lead to most/all students being described as engaged learners? Keeping specific students in mind, what do they need in order to re-engage in classroom learning?

C *Changes in the physical arrangement of the classroom?*

Think about how you learn best (think of the best staff development you ever attended, your favorite place to read, the materials you need to do your best writing). What have these students told you about what makes it hard for them to function well in class? Do they do well sitting for lengthy periods of time at a desk? Do they work well with some but not other students? What distracts them? Now, explore ways to rearrange the classroom to accommodate a wider range of student differences and needs.

C *Changes in the presentation of material?*

Given that there are district mandated materials and content (e.g., texts), re-engaging students requires using the material differently (e.g., digestible chunks, designing opportunities for motivated practice) and supplementing it with materials and activities that the student perceives as motivating (e.g., enrichment opportunities). From a motivational perspective, offering real options and enabling student choice are essential in re-engaging students.

C *Changes in workload and nature of feedback?*

Given the above changes, some students still need to have workload and feedback accommodations (e.g., more time to do something, feedback that enables them to experience even small successes). From a motivational perspective, it is essential to maximize student feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to others and to minimize threats to such feelings.

The emphasis in all the above is to account for differences in motivation as well as capability in designing learning opportunities and then implementing them in ways than enhance intrinsic motivation for ongoing learning at school.

>>Some points about: *Students who haven't made a good relationship with teachers and are reacting/resisting.*

Common laments:

     C *They could do it if they only wanted to!!!*

     C *These are smart kids, but they just won't do the work!*

     C *If he survives his childhood and adolescence, he'll probably be a very successful adult!*

Making a positive, caring connection with such students is essential.

Researchers such as David Hawkins and Richard Catalano have found that a core factor in preventing problems is "strong, attached relationships with adults who hold healthy beliefs and clear standards for young people, and an investment in positive lines of action such as school, service and work."

It is ironic that this is often translated into "mentor" programs where a few students spend a few hours in such attached relationships. The real opportunity every day, all day in school (and at home) is for a teacher (and parent) to be the adult with whom a student has a strong relationship.

In their description of Communities that Care, Hawkins and Catalano describe how such bonds between students and adults are established:

"Research shows that a child living in a high-risk environment can be protected from problem behaviors by a strong, affectionate relationship with an adult who cares about, and is committed to, his or her healthy development. This can be any caring adult – a parent, a teacher, an extended family member, a coach, and employer or an adult from the child's faith community. The most important part of this relationship is that the youth has a long-term investment in it, that he or she believes the relationship is worth protecting, and so is motivated to follow the healthy beliefs and clear standards held by the person.

So what creates these protective bonds?

There must be opportunities for young people to be involved in their families, school and communities in meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways – to make a real contribution and feel valued for their efforts and accomplishments.

For young people to take advantage of those opportunities, they need the social, cognitive, emotional and behavioral skills to be successful.

Finally, young people need recognition for their involvement . . . ."

Building a strong, positive relationship with difficult students is a challenge. Looking for the strengths, building on the competence, and re-establishing relationships of mutual respect is best achieved when support staff and teachers work as a team. Support staff often have the opportunity to get to know these students and can take the lead is helping others see what is "special" in a student who hasn't yet made good connections with teachers and school staff.

>>Some points about: *Students who haven't found a supportive group of friends and feel isolated/alienated.*

For many students there is nothing as important in school as the social dynamics:

> *Who's in and who's out?*

> *Who is my friend?*

> *Who likes me and who do I like?*

While schools focus on cognitive skills, they too seldom address the development of social and emotional skills. There are programs and curriculum designed for this important area of development, but every day there are natural opportunities for schools to enhance students' positive relations with each other.

In class, during breaks, before and after school, during lunch, at student activities, in the community.

This is the time of year to consider how the school is promoting social and emotional development and to plan ways to enhance the focus on such matters as:.

- C cooperative learning and team play

- C students as leaders at school

- C groups of students engaged in project learning

- C students involved in service learning in the community

- C same-age and cross-age peer contact

Schools have learned a great deal about reducing bullying and violence and promoting a supportive environment. Some students need just a bit more help in connecting with other students in a positive way. School support staff and teachers can create a range of opportunities both inside the classroom and out of class to address these problems.

In January, we will begin the new year with a range of ideas for moving on in ways that leave no child behind!

For more materials on these topics, go to the Center Website and use the Quick Find Search to explore the following (among other) topics:

- Barriers to Learning
- Classroom-Focused Enabling
- C Environments that Support Learning
- C Mentoring
- C Motivation
- C Peer Relationships
- C Prevention for Students at Risk
- C Resilience
- C Volunteers