



Inspiring **UNMOTIVATED STUDENTS**

BY JENNIFER L. M. GUNN

Social emotional learning for students who struggle with apathy

Some students have a complex relationship with education.

Maybe they don't like school. They may want to be left alone, or they do just enough to get by. Students can be unmotivated for a myriad of reasons and tend to turn in incomplete or mediocre assignments, claiming it's "good enough." But it is possible to shake up this stagnation. Social emotional learning tools allow teachers to recognize and handle student apathy and inspire even uninspired students. They also play into the larger vision you have for your classroom, tailoring your approach to the individual needs of your students and the needs of the collective group.

THEY DON'T TEACH THE SAME WAY YOU DO

Students may struggle to reveal their full potential in a traditional classroom. That's what John F. Kennedy High School teacher Beau Gasinski learned this year with one of his entrepreneurial pathway students. Gasinski reviewed transcripts to scope out his new students and assess their abilities to manage in his class. Transcripts showed an incoming student appeared to be struggling academically was highly engaged and successful with Hipster Society, a t-shirt company she started in an Empowered classroom. She quickly became the go-to person in the class when it came to using the Cricut or heat press to create logos. When her grades put her at risk of not graduating, Gasinski asked why she struggled so much in other classes while she shined in his classroom. Her response was one he'll never forget:

"Because they don't teach the same way that you do. I look forward to coming to your class each and every day because I am excited about what we do in here. It's just the way that I learn best."

The confidence she developed in Gasinski's class is making a difference: She graduated in Spring 2023 with plans to attend junior college.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The now-famous Rita Pierson TEDTalk said it best: "Kids don't learn from people they don't like." While some teachers who rely solely on the power-dynamic disagree, relationships are a crucial foundation for learning — especially with students who have strained connections to school.

Gina Angelillo-Farieri, a Restorative Justice Coordinator in the New York City Department of Education, specializes in the use of social emotional learning (SEL) strategies to benefit learners. She routinely trains other educators in how to implement SEL and restorative justice practices to improve student wellbeing and learning outcomes.

Praising progress – even in small amounts – is just as important as praising that correct answer.

"A good life is filled with good relationships," she says. "When the people we work for see us and treat us with respect, kindness, and humanity, we want to show them our best and make them proud. The same goes for our students. The more we show them that we care about them as individuals and can connect with them, the happier they will be to be in your class and show you they can try."

Relationships are the starting point in developing a connection with a student. You may come to find out valuable information about the root causes of their academic apathy or struggle.

INCENTIVES WITH MEANING

Incentives aren't a new concept, but we're not just talking gold stars or candy here. Incentives that have real meaning to the student are discovered by building relationships, and they encourage unmotivated students to push past their usual boundaries.

Let's say a student always comments on the Starbucks drink on your desk and how they've always wanted to try the famous Pink Drink. An incentive with meaning could be that if they complete a certain big milestone, you share a Starbucks treat together to celebrate. Incentives with meaning are something that has significance to the student. Offering such an incentive shows good faith and your dedication to the relationship. It's about finding what matters to the student and tapping into that to make a connection: "Show me you can complete this project and I'll finally make that funny dance TikTok with you." Extrinsic motivators may not be an everyday, all-the-time occurrence, but when used appropriately they

can build a bridge to more ongoing intrinsic motivation.

Ready for a more complex but highly motivating system? Try a true classroom economy by printing out currency, distributing it to reinforce efforts by students who are typically least motivated, and building an auction with items that you've learned your kids love the most. It steps up the reward system, adds real-world skill-building, and makes things a heck of a lot more fun.

Let's talk about the intangible motivators as well. Feedback and compassion are also forms of incentive. Simply being seen is a big motivator, so feedback that begins with "I noticed that you..." shows students that you have observed their efforts personally. And if you can't seem to get through to a student yourself, there may be someone else in the building who can.

"Let's face it, you're not going to connect with every single student at the same level, but there is likely someone in the building



who might have a great rapport with a student who you can't seem to connect with as well as you would like to," says Angelillo-Farieri. "Leverage those relationships! I once had a student who loved baseball, and I used to see him chatting and having a great time with one of our teacher's aids in the hallway. I was really struggling with him one day and I sought out the aide and the student after class. We had a heartfelt, 'we see you; we care about you, and we know you can do better' discussion. It completely turned things around, and I was able to tell the aide to give the student kudos on his hard work in the future." That kind of student support teamwork is an incentive with meaning.

Workload overwhelm is real... Breaking down tasks into smaller sections makes things feel more manageable.

AFFIRMATION, NOT JUST PRAISE

Frequently, students who lack motivation in school hear a lot of negative messages. "Try harder." "If you just applied yourself..."

"Why can't you just do it?" This type of communication closes off students to learning and their teachers because they don't trust adults to see them as anything but a disappointment.

Engaging in a practice of affirmation — not just praise, but affirmation — can break through those barriers. By building a relationship, a teacher discovers what a student needs to hear and what kind of feedback hits their heart. Actions are also essential. For example, hanging up artwork in the classroom by a student who is good at drawing, but who maybe draws too much in class, builds the relationship by affirming his strengths rather than harping on his academic distractions. This builds trust and makes a student want to work harder for you. It opens doors to learning, as the student is more willing to take risks because they trust you to see and affirm who they are.

Students who seem to lack motivation may not believe in their capacity to grow — or they think growth is too much work. "Praising progress — even in small amounts — is just as important, if not more so, as praising that correct answer because it instills the idea of a growth mindset in your students, which studies show improves their ability

to cope with anxiety and stress, improving their mental health," says Angelillo-Farieri. When students begin to see that they are in fact learning new skills and are more capable than before, they are more likely to want to do more.

CHUNKING

For some students, the sheer volume of schoolwork is overwhelming or just plain discouraging. They learn early on that doing the bare minimum works and saves them from dealing with the onslaught of purposeless work. "Workload overwhelm is real. Especially for students who may have a focusing issue or neurodevelopmental condition, such as ADHD. Breaking down instructions and work tasks into smaller sections makes things feel more manageable for students and can provide a better quality of work" says Angelillo-Farieri. When dealing with students who won't push past their limits, chunking material and assignments is an effective tool for not only helping students get through their work but for building capacity over time.

Employing these social emotional learning strategies can lead to better outcomes for students and help teachers achieve their vision of a successful learning environment in their classrooms.

Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teacher, teaching coach, and educator in New York City. She created Right to Read, a literacy acceleration program for teens, steeped in social justice. She also created the progressive learning models, The Big Idea Project and We the Change. Jennifer is also co-founder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation. She is a regular presenter at conferences and frequently writes about education, adolescent literacy and innovation. Connect with Jennifer on Twitter: @jenniferlmgunn.



THE VISION ISSUE
For more inspiration, check out the Empowered Hub.
 **EmpoweredHub.org**