

# How Do You Motivate the Reluctant Learner?

## Spark Enthusiasm, Boost Confidence

Enthusiasm is contagious. I love what I do, and my students sense it. I seek to build confidence and create positive experiences routinely. I praise my students for trying and reassure them often. My aim is improved comprehension. In higher-level math, this comes with practice and tenacity. But great effort doesn't happen unless students believe in their own intelligence and potential, so I factor in effort when grading. When students believe they have a chance to pass, they are more willing to produce throughout the entire quarter.

—Michael Fenick, Mathematics Teacher,  
San Pasqual Academy, Juvenile Court  
and Community Schools, Escondido, California

## Encourage Argument

Argument *motivates*. And the abilities it cultivates are at the heart of intellectual development, college preparation, and career advancement. I know from experience that, from the earliest grades, even struggling students love to read analytically and then defend their interpretation with support from the text—in history, English, science, and beyond. It is high time we put close, purposeful reading and “argumentative literacy” at the core of learning.

—Mike Schmoker, Author of *Results Now:  
How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements  
in Teaching and Learning* (ASCD, 2006)

## Build Learning Around Students

Experience has taught me that there are very few reluctant learners in our public school classrooms. I choose to believe that we have reluctant school systems, schools, administrators, and teachers.

Students live in a very hands-on, high-tech, high-touch world. Cell phones, text messaging, the Internet, cable television, and a global economy shape students' everyday thinking. Observing a recent grand opening of BizTown, a San Diego-based Junior Achievement education program for 5th grade students, further confirmed my beliefs. Students spent 20 hours preparing for the listening, speaking, reading, writing, and mathematical tasks required to run a simulated municipality and related businesses. The outcome was astonishing. Students implemented business plans, wrote checks, deposited and invested money, and developed insurance policies. Retail and manufacturing activity was flourishing. Discipline and motivation issues were nonexistent. This can be accomplished in classrooms, too!

Talented teachers build learning around students rather than build learning structures and put students in them. The question is not how do we make school fun, but rather, how do we make schooling relevant and engaging?

—Lowell Billings, Superintendent, Chula Vista Elementary  
School District, Chula Vista, California



See *EL* online ([www.ascd.org/el](http://www.ascd.org/el)) for more educators' responses. Share your own ideas about what motivates reluctant learners on *Inservice*, the ASCD blog, at [www.ascd.org/blog](http://www.ascd.org/blog).

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## Foster Relationships and a Love of School

More than 10,000 English language learners (ELLs) hail from more than 100 countries and speak almost 100 languages in Boston's 145 public schools. If these students do not pass state exams, they face serious consequences, including not being promoted to the next grade or not graduating. Although most ELLs enter school eager to learn, it is not surprising that many eventually become discouraged and lose their motivation.

One way to help students, especially adolescents, love school is to create opportunities for positive relationships between each student and an adult in the student's academic life. Some of the best ways to help ELLs overcome their chal-

lenges and engage in learning are to foster positive relationships with adults, help students learn to love school and reading, and increase students' confidence in mathematics.

I once took a group of summer school geometry students, all ELLs who had failed geometry the previous year, outside to construct a mini baseball field. I learned that the distance from the pitcher's mound to home plate is 60.5 feet and that the distance between the bases is 90 feet. My students learned that even if we shrink the distances, as long as we do it proportionately the angles between bases remain the same. More important, we had fun.

—Danielle Carrigo, Senior Director, Office of Language  
Learning and Support Services, Boston Public Schools

## Honor Students' Cultures

American Horse School's population is 100 percent Lakota of the Oglala Sioux Tribe located in western South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Our students come from a close-knit cultural community that is trying to retain its own Lakota native language and culture. These children's parents did not learn the Mother Goose nursery rhymes or read about Dick, Jane, and Spot. They grew up as Lakota children hearing the stories of their grandmothers and grandfathers about the injustices, poverty, and shame that their families have endured.

As a reading specialist and elementary administrator, I have found that the best way to motivate reluctant learners is to provide vast resources to “hook” children into wanting to learn. Our school board has allowed me to purchase many different reading, math, and intervention programs. In addition, we bring parents into the learning environment so that students' academic success is supported in the home.

—Gloria J. Coats-Kitsopoulos, Principal/Superintendent,  
American Horse School, Allen, South Dakota

## Provide Structure and Feedback

As teachers, our greatest hope is that students will be self-motivated and will seek learning for learning's sake. But most will require some sort of external encouragement to meet their goals. Most people, whatever their age, react positively to a deadline for completing their work. Most want to know how well they did on an assignment.

One of the goals of schooling is to teach children to plan ahead; to defer gratification of their immediate wishes; to work for abstract rewards (a grade or the teacher's approval), rather than dollars or doughnuts. Schooling teaches them to manipulate symbols, which is the work of the modern world. Ideally, students should be motivated to learn by the realization that they are improving themselves and their life chances.

—Diane Ravitch, Research Professor of Education,  
New York University