I have worked in diverse (i.e., large percentages of American Indian, Black, and Latino students) and homogeneous (i.e., mostly White, upper-class students) schools and found that, for some reason, in each one there are some kids who just will not do their homework. Over time, I developed several of my own strategies to motivate students, but I wanted research-based methods I could use in my classroom.

At the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, a division of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), I was able to study the correlation between student success and homework. I began my research by asking, How does one motivate a detached middle school student to do homework through heavier use of parental involvement? What I found was that to even think about getting parents involved, I had to change my perceptions of motivation and parent involvement.

Why Are Students Unmotivated?
My research suggested three possible reasons for students' lack of motivation: transitioning, autonomy, and perception of failure. Once the reasons why students are unmotivated are clear, educators are better equipped to help their students. First, teachers must ask some questions: Is the student's lack of motivation just the fallout from the student's transition from elementary school to middle school? This transition is a time when students' peer and community influences change and the family focus shifts. As their children undergo this transition, parents know their role is changing but may not know how to make their new role a positive one.

Second, does the student want to be more independent? Frustration levels increase at the middle level and the student may feel a need for or lack of autonomy. At the middle level, students' abilities to make choices are growing, but the opportunities to do so may not be available to them. At least two major components of their daily life—course selection and homework assignment—are decided with little input from students. Not doing homework may feel like the only choice they have.

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Third, what are the students’ perceptions of failure? According to Brewster and Fager (2000), students who perceive themselves as having failed before are less likely to be motivated in a learning environment.

How Do Teachers Perceive Parent Involvement?
Parent-teacher conferences, phone calls, and progress reports are just the “at-school” academic involvement parents can have. At-home academic involvement is much more subtle and far-reaching. “Families of all cultural backgrounds, education, and income levels encourage their children...and keep them focused on learning and homework. In other words, all families can, and often do, have a positive influence on their children’s learning” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 34).

Providing a quiet place to work, creating a daily study schedule, inventing more opportunities for students to make choices, asking questions about each subject, and asking their child teach them are ways that parents can be involved in their child’s education. It is important to note that parents have “different skills and differing levels of comfort when it comes to school involvement” (Fager & Brewster, 1999, p. 7). We educators must be prepared to understand and support the diversity of family involvement.

Setting the Example
A number of strategies can help educators involve parents in increasing student motivation. One important, common method is present in each strategy: envisioning the experience of all the involved parties. To understand how what they do and say can be perceived, educators must train themselves to look through parents’ and students’ eyes.

Leave emotion out of the situation. Once, I encountered a mother who was frustrated by her daughter’s struggles in learning math. The mother sent me a note berating me for things out of my control, such as a poorly written textbook, then called the principal to complain. I envisioned treating her the same way in an upcoming meeting, but I had to keep her daughter’s, my student’s, success at the front of my mind. Instead of reacting emotionally, I prepared notes on how the mother could help her daughter progress. To help parents become involved, educators must disregard their personal feelings about parents, no matter how good or bad the previous interaction may have been.

Establish honest and effective communication with the parents. According to Fager and Brewster (1999), teachers should “address specific complaints with ideas about what you and the parent can do together to find a solution” (p. 4). When I met with my student’s mother, instead of lashing at her or ignoring the situation, I addressed her note in a professional manner. I let her know that although I appreciated the fact that she made contact with me when she was frustrated, her tone and implications were inappropriate and unfair. I made it clear that I understood that her goal was to help her daughter get the most from her education. Then I spoke with her about ways she could help her child become more successful, some of which required that she and I work together.

She responded well to being treated in an honest and (terrifying, for me) open manner. From then on, we were able to communicate often and frankly about her child and she became one of my biggest parent supporters. All it took was one conference in which I gently asked her to support me instead of telling me how to do my job.

Take the initiative to build relationships. If educators take the time to build relationships, they can create lasting alliances in which everyone involved has a common goal—student success. Common ground emerges when schools and communities share purposes, processes, and a pledge to work together (Ashby, Garza, & Rivers, 1999). This translates perfectly to a smaller level—that of the classroom teacher and students’ parents.

For example, when I found out that a student’s mom was as much a dog-lover as I am, I intentionally mentioned that during our parent-teacher conference. This common interest helped us to connect outside of our current context, which offered an opportunity to connect in our current context. She began to take a more active role in her son’s homework process because she knew that she could come and talk to me about it as often as she liked.

Give parents information and skills to motivate their students and celebrate their success. Many parents do not feel that they have the vocabulary and tools they need to help their children succeed in school. Who better to help parents learn this information than educators? One way to teach parents comes early in the school year. At back-to-school events, parents can be given a list of questions they can ask their kids or tips on helping them at home in ways that are appropriate to the student’s grade level.

“Knowledge and confidence [are] the foundations for action,” say Kroll, Sexton, Raimondo, Corbett, and Wilson (2001, p. 12). Parents who know they’ve succeeded at helping their child want to repeat that success
again and again and do better each time. When the initially confrontational mother was able to help her daughter make progress, I routinely sent notes home that simply said, “Way to go, Mom!” or “With your help, she has made a lot of progress!” It took only a few seconds of my time to ensure that she would continue to work with me to help her daughter progress.

Make a connection with students. Parents who hear that teachers made the effort to know their students as individuals feel more comfortable supporting their agenda. Offer students one-on-one help, tutoring, and ask what they like to do. The tutoring approach helped me get to know my students better, which helped me think of ways to better serve their interests and meet their needs.

For example, during tutoring I got to know one of my students who acts out a lot during class. I learned that he is a huge Ozzy Osbourne fan, so we began to write math problems involving Ozzy and concert information. I also learned that his father had been injured at work a few years earlier, and there was a struggle between his father and the company at which he worked. Seeing his dad suffer through the injury and lawsuit made my student really upset, he felt powerless in the situation. Once we got some of his frustrations out in the open, he felt free to set goals and had more motivation.

Giving Students Autonomy
Sometimes it takes a little more originality to reach a student. All educators know that giving students one-on-one attention is a great way to teach, but we also know that some kids won’t respond to teacher attention. When that happens, teachers must get creative and talk with students and their parents. Students who have the opportunity to speak their minds and plan for their own success will be more motivated.

During one such talk, I asked a student’s grandfather if the student fidgeted all the time at home like he did in class. The student wouldn’t sit still; the only time he seemed to pay attention was when he held a set of drumsticks. The three of us decided that if he could just touch something at all times, he might start to work more productively in school. We concluded that a beanbag would be a good object for the student to hold: it would be less noisy than the drumsticks if he dropped it, and he would be less likely to hurt himself or someone else than with the drumsticks. After giving the student a beanbag, he became much more focused and organized. By working together, as leaders often do, we provided a successful strategy for the student.

The attitudes of difficult students may need to be called into attention. One student made disparaging remarks about other students, class material, and my teaching methods. In confidence, I told her that although I respected her right to dislike her classmates, my class, and me, we needed to find some common ground because she needed to pass my class. I told her that she did not have to like me and that I didn’t have to like her, but we needed to find a peaceful co-existence.

No one had ever told her that she could dislike school and teachers before and that they respected her autonomy. No one had given her the chance to prove that she could make mature decisions and be a leader. Within a week of our conversation, she was one of my hardest-working students, coming in for extra help and helping other students stay on task. This method isn’t foolproof—but what if? Another student responded well at first but let her work slide again because outside factors (e.g., her home life and friends) were pulling her back into her old habits.
Getting Out of the Classroom

Cocurricular activities with positive adult role models help students see the relevance of their homework. Other benefits include teaching students better time management skills and “greater potential for interaction with positive peers who share similar goals...and can encourage and inspire them to do well in school” (Jordan & Nettles, 1999, p. 1). As a faculty moderator at one school, I encouraged a student to join the student government who might not have joined of her own accord. She became a tremendous asset and began to see herself as an important part of the school. This made her increase her academic effort as well.

Service-learning is another means to bring the community to the classroom or to bring the classroom to the community and can help make assignments more meaningful and relevant to students. Scales, Blythe, Berkas, and Kielsmeier (2000) stated that the effects of service learning on middle school students include showing “larger gains on some educational measures, including GPA in core academic subjects” (p. 336). The authors also discuss other benefits, including greater self-confidence and a positive perception of teachers and school, all of which lead to more intrinsic motivation in student homework.

To create an out-of-school activity, I planned a trip to the Grand Canyon and Zion National Park for my students. Although not all of them ended up going with me, they all took part in fundraising and raising community awareness of events happening in the middle school. Planning the trip provided opportunities for lessons in math, science, social studies, and language arts. Students who went on the trip escaped their daily grind and developed more autonomy as they decided with whom to share a room and which activities to participate in. The families of two of my students became much more involved in their sons’ daily work as they helped plan the trip.

Conclusion

Student achievement should always be foremost in our thought process as teachers. When students do their homework and get parent help, they perform better. They may not become A+ students, but their attitude and effort improve. Henderson and Mapp (2002) say that “programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children’s learning at home are linked to higher student achievement” (p. 25) and that “the more families support their children’s learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education” (p. 30). Parent help works.

Being a teacher means being a leader. Taking action and creating an environment that motivates others is at the core of an educator’s purpose. Henderson and Mapp (2002) write, “The responsibility for children’s educational development is a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff, and community members” (p. 51). When everyone works together, relationships between teachers and parents are positive and proactive.

References


