

My Get Up & Go

With a pandemic that has gone on for more than a year, how do students and teachers stay motivated?

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Got Up & Went



CRONIN

EVERYONE KNEW learning during a pandemic wouldn't be easy, but could we have guessed it would be quite this hard?

Schools are still battling everything from poor internet service to low attendance. Parents are overwhelmed in homes that have also become workplaces and classrooms. Teachers are demoralized. And students are exhausted, burned out after hours of online classes, and that is if they even show up at all.

The result is students — and teachers — who have lost so much of what used to keep them motivated. Without the ballast of most extracurricular activities like athletics, drama, and band to keep them engaged, many students lost the motivation this year to turn in homework or turn on cameras during remote lessons. Teachers are burnt out, many discouraged by not keeping up with curriculum standards and constantly having to find new ways to keep their students invested in their learning.

Some schools have gone back, but with a return to “normal” school unlikely for many districts until the fall of 2021, teachers and students are having to find new ways to stay motivated to learn during a school year unlike any other.

The Science of Motivation

ABIGAIL WILLIAMSON ED.M.'15, teaches English Language Development on Martha's Vineyard. Her middle school students are brand new to the United States, working hard to learn a new language, many of them also taking care of younger siblings at home during remote learning while their parents are at work.

But for five minutes every day, students put aside the challenges they are facing and turn on their favorite song. Some students don sunglasses or fun hats, others grab stuffed animals to join them onscreen for their class DJ Dance Party.

“I wanted to give the kids jobs to keep them engaged and give them some ownership,” says Williamson. “The dance party offers some lightness and fun, but I believe also contributes to our strong attendance and participation.”

Especially during these stressful times, it is important for teachers to think about how students are doing not only academically but also emotionally, and to find ways to inject joy into their lessons.

CHRISTINA HINTON, ED.M.'06, ED.D.'12, founder and CEO of Research Schools International, which partners with schools to carry out collaborative research, says lessons like the DJ Dance Party can make a huge impact for students.

“There's a misconception that learning can either be rigorous or fun. That's not what we're finding in our research,” Hinton says. “The more they are flourishing and happy, the better, on average, students are doing academically.”

Happy students are also motivated ones. Research has found that motivation is driven by a combination of a person's earliest experiences and innate biological factors. According to a recent report from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, there are two types of motivation: one that seeks out pleasure (known as approach motivation) and the other that avoids danger (known as avoidance motivation).

Both of these types of motivation develop early in childhood, and both are influenced by intrinsic (like a child's desire to explore or master a skill) and extrinsic factors (external validation from grades or awards). A healthy motivation system is one built on intrinsic drivers supported by positive extrinsic feedback.

For teachers and parents, there are many ways to encourage motivation. Activities like the DJ Dance Party that provide children space for playful exploration help fuel intrinsic motivation. Activities that appropriately challenge students are also great, but they must be carefully selected as students will lose motivation when an activity is too hard or too easy. Students are also more motivated when they feel a sense of ownership over their work.

These types of activities can also spur in students a sense of curiosity, another good driver of motivation. Ed School associate professor and



HAPPY STUDENTS ARE MOTIVATED STUDENTS

Research has shown that the strongest predictor of happiness — more than even money or physical health — is the strength of your social connections. That’s true for adults and children.

CHRISTINA HINTON ED.M.’06, ED.D.’12, knows all too well the importance of happy students and teachers after nearly a decade partnering with schools around the world to conduct collaborative research in classrooms as founder and CEO of Research Schools International.

When she was a doctoral student at the Ed School, Hinton found in her study on happiness that for students from elementary school to high school, happiness is positively correlated with motivation and academic achievement. She also found that creating strong relationships with teachers and peers plays an important role in student happiness.

Now more than ever it is crucial to discover ways to encourage happiness and connection when so many are still apart, and Hinton says it doesn’t take that much to do. “You can do really small things and they can have a big impact on happiness.” Some of her suggestions include:

- **Find the right balance of challenge.** Research has shown that too little challenge can lead to boredom, but too much challenge and a person will become discouraged. “There is an optimal level of challenge where people are engaged but not overwhelmed called the Zone of Proximal Development,” says Hinton. During remote learning, setting realistic goals is important. Teachers need to remember that students aren’t going to move at the same pace as they could in the classroom, and to also adjust goals for students in unique circumstances.

- **Provide social connection.** All students are going to need extra emotional support this year, and it is important to make a special effort to build community. Hinton says teachers, especially those still teaching virtually, should find new ways to connect, such as offering virtual office hours or fun end-of-year virtual social events. Hinton also says to remember to practice compassion, especially with students who are disruptive. “Everyone is experiencing stress right now. You don’t know what they are facing at home. Offer compassion, understanding and support. Instead of punishments, set clear boundaries with natural consequences.”

- **Help students to flourish.** When students are flourishing, they are more motivated and more effective learners. Hinton says there are a number of ways to promote flourishing during in-person or remote learning, such as:

Practice gratitude. “Research shows that low-lift strategies that promote gratitude can have a big impact on happiness,” Hinton says, like having students write down one thing they are grateful for in a Zoom chat or before an in-person class begins.

Support others. “If you want to be happy and flourish, you should focus on supporting others,” Hinton says. Encouraging students to engage in acts of kindness in their daily lives is a good place to start, or teachers can choose a cause to work on together as a class.

Incorporate humor. Finding something to laugh about this year might be difficult, but it’s worth it. “Research shows that laughter not only boosts well-being and happiness, but also physical health,” Hinton says.

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cognitive research scientist Elizabeth Bonawitz says that curiosity is a core drive that all human beings are born with.

“It’s a drive like hunger or thirst, and it can get us learning very rapidly,” Bonawitz says. Under particularly stressful environments, however, say like during a global pandemic, the body must balance all its needs. “Do I have time to be curious or am I worried about my next meal, or if grandma is going to get sick? If you’re under a lot of duress, you don’t have time to indulge your curiosity,” so actively finding ways to encourage curiosity in the classroom is so important.

Williamson came up with the idea for the dance party at the beginning of this unusual school year, trying to think of ways to replicate traditional classroom management techniques for online learning. Some of her more hesitant learners were hooked from the beginning. Besides the opportunity to get up and move around, it also provided students a chance to show a bit about their personalities, connect over shared interests, and extend their learning, since the songs they choose have connections to the vocabulary they are learning.

Williamson says this break in the day has also given her a unique insight into her students. In her first year at a new school, Williamson says she was initially worried about building connections with students she had never met, but she says the same theories for building community when in-person apply to remote learning.

“Their creativity in activities like the dance party motivates me to find more ways to let them express their personalities,” Williamson says. “I ask students about their lives and listen and incorporate that into my lessons. You can have deep relationships with students even online.”

Find New Ways to Connect

Those relationships are a critical component of motivation. As Bonawitz has found in her research, humans are social beings with minds designed to learn from other people. When students lose those important relationships with

teachers and peers, they are far less likely to be motivated to learn.

The pandemic and remote learning have seriously disrupted those important connections, resulting in huge numbers of students losing the motivation to even show up for virtual classes, let alone participate. Bellwether Education Partners, an education nonprofit, estimates that between 1 million and 3 million U.S. students haven't attended school since pandemic-related school closures began in March 2020, hitting high-risk groups including homeless students and children with disabilities particularly hard.

And there is no silver bullet to solving the problem. Sruti Sriram is a current Ed School student and teaches English to 11th- and 12th-graders at a boarding school in Pune, India. Sriram says her school has tried different ways to keep students engaged, trying to find a balance between learning models. While there was early success with each new attempt, student engagement would inevitably drop off.

"We launched weekly asynchronous modules that students were encouraged to complete at their own pace," she says. At first the response was incredible, but two months later, students were exhausted. "We then tried to shift to synchronous classes, but attendance would be very high for the first week and then drop off the second week for a variety of reasons," including family constraints and limited Internet access.

Sriram says from her own positive experience as a student in her Ed School classes, she has been inspired to be more intentional using tools like virtual breakout rooms to build relationships. She's also recognized that, this year especially, the emphasis needs to be on how students are doing emotionally, not just academically.

"My students are going through so much at home. I've realized how important it is for students to feel supported in the classroom before I can harangue them about incomplete homework or give them a lot of corrections," she says. "That's always been true, but in remote learning it's an even more apparent reminder that the job is to care for the whole student."

Even during normal times, these relationships are important to academic development. During the pandemic, they are crucial. Research has shown that when teachers can build a good rapport with their students, those students are more motivated to do well in school. To build that rapport, students need to believe that their teacher has a good sense of their abilities.

"It's critical to learning that a teacher has an accurate understanding of their students," says Bonawitz. "When a child thinks a teacher doesn't have a good sense of their abilities, it totally shapes what kind of exploration and projects they think they can pursue."

In one lab experiment, Bonawitz has found that when children as young as 6 think their teacher is overestimating their abilities, they will choose less challenging work, while if a teacher underestimates their abilities, they will seek work that might be too difficult for them.

With the pandemic removing much of the one-on-one time for students and teachers to get to know each other well, it's important for teachers to find new ways to show their students they know them.

"Reciprocity is really critical to make sure there is maximum engagement," Bonawitz says. "Regular feedback and mini-assessments can help so that students know the teacher is aware of their current place and the teacher is using that information for tailoring the learning."

Hinton says making room to provide students extra emotional support this year is so important, and finding additional opportunities, like through virtual office hours, can make a big difference for students and teachers to build relationships while apart and maintain motivation.

JILL GOLDBERG, ED.M.'93, credits her students staying motivated thanks to recognizing new ways of building relationships. Goldberg, who teaches sixth grade English language arts in upstate New York, says it was challenging at first teaching to static profile pictures of students or empty black rectangles because her district, like many across the county, does not require students to turn on cameras when remote.

But then students, some shy or just unwilling to turn their cameras on during full class activities, started to reach out in other ways. Many found their voice over email. Others requested private Zoom breakout meetings to connect between classes or after school, sometimes to talk about academic work, other times just to share something personal, like a pair of twins in her class excited to share news of a new pet.

"It's wonderful how many kids are so much more comfortable and proficient and proactive in initiating contact" over digital platforms, Goldberg says. Remote learning has also given Goldberg and her students a change of pace to their normal in-person schedule that left little time in the day to connect. Now, students have breaks between periods and teachers can use that time for extra help sessions or just one-on-one check-ins.

Professor Jal Mehta isn't surprised that some students and teachers are finding positives during remote learning. Mehta says that while traditional in-person school can be exhausting for students required to be "on" and engaged all day with teachers and peers, remote learning has given some students a chance to slow down.

"Teachers have reported more contact and conversations with students and families. I think some people have experienced that there's less rush and a chance to do things in more depth," Mehta says.

Caring for the Adults in the Room

Of course, not everyone is finding remote learning a happy new environment. In November, the *Education Week* Research Center found that nearly 75% of teachers say their morale is lower than it was before the pandemic. Trying to learn new technology, keep students invested, and deal with the challenges of their own lives is leaving many teachers burnt out.

With teachers feeling dejected from not keeping up with curriculum standards or blaming themselves for students falling behind, Hinton says now it's more important than ever for

teachers to not only show compassion for their students but also for themselves.

“Teachers have to treat this as a totally different year and be patient with themselves,” she says. “A great rule of thumb for practicing self-compassion is to treat yourself the way you would treat a best friend.”

That change in mentality was important for **IAN MALMSTROM, ED.M.’10**, a middle school history teacher and athletic director in Illinois.

“The most discouraging thing was realizing I wasn’t going to accomplish as much as I have in past years. That bothered me at first, the feeling I wasn’t doing as well as a teacher. But putting that stress on myself wasn’t going to work. I’ve accepted that,” Malmstrom says.

Malmstrom isn’t alone. A survey by the RAND Corporation found in its American Educator Panels Survey in October that most classrooms are not proceeding at their normal pace, with 56% of teachers saying that they had covered half, or less than half, of their normal curriculum, and only 1 in 5 teachers saying they were on the same schedule as years past.

Rather than putting pressure on themselves to jam as much of the old curriculum into this year, experts like Mehta are advocating a “Marie Kondo” approach to curriculum, borrowing from the Japanese tidying expert. In his recent *New York Times* opinion piece, Mehta encourages teachers to accept a “less is more” attitude by “discarding the many topics that have accumulated like old souvenirs, while retaining essential knowledge and topics that spark joy.”

At her school in Providence, Rhode Island, academic dean **KAITLIN MORAN, ED.M.’20**, has worked with faculty and administrators to reduce their academic program to the most essential content and setting realistic learning goals. The school day itself has been shortened and longer blocks of instruction in subjects like math, science, and social studies have been shortened to accommodate students, including taking into account time spent on screens.

“I think what has helped students and teachers feel more motivated is by setting bite-size

achievable goals that work towards a grade-level standard. As much as we can collaborate on best practices, that has also helped keep our team engaged and motivated,” Moran says.

To that end, Moran has also worked with teachers to implement targeted learning goals to address missed learning from the spring by having each student complete a diagnostic assessment, allowing teachers to know which areas of instruction to focus on to help close gaps.

Not everything can simply be replaced virtually. One of the biggest losses since the pandemic hit has been extracurriculars. Malmstrom says athletics have been virtually nonexistent in Illinois since the start of the pandemic, and without them, many students have just given up.

“My students have just been starved for athletic opportunities,” Malmstrom says, citing several academically thriving students who have lost their motivation to do well in school. “We have more time, but people don’t have the desire to do as much as we used to. I have students who were mainly doing schoolwork to stay eligible for sports, and they’ve quit trying.”

Malmstrom and his colleagues have tried to find some replacements. In the fall, when the weather was nice, they started an afterschool running club, which had a great turnout of students eager to do any sort of outdoor activity. His school also launched a virtual chess club and quiz bowl team, offering online practices.

Malmstrom is realistic that these activities are only stopgaps until students can return to regular activities, but they have been helpful in keeping morale and motivation up.

“The students aren’t going to be interested in everything, but our hope is that each student can find something that engages him or her in addition to their regular classwork,” he says.

Eventually, the world will return to some new normal, and schools with it. While there are many challenges that students and teachers have faced during this year, there are some areas of remote learning that might endure.

Researchers like Mehta say the lessons learned during remote learning and the changes made to support students and teachers should spur an even greater effort to reimagine and rebuild schools.

“Schools weren’t working well for students pre-pandemic. To put things back exactly as they were is ignoring inequities and disengagement,” says Mehta.

When schools can be fully reopened, Mehta says leaders need to think about areas that helped keep students motivated this year and amplify them, including giving students greater agency over their learning and providing more time for teachers to connect with families.

“How do we create the space to do more of those things when we come back to regular school,” he says, “and what do we want to let go of to allow those things to grow? I think those are the questions I would ask everybody.”

Andrew Bauld, the communications coordinator at the Berkeley Carroll School in New York City, is a frequent contributor to *Ed*.