

3 Counterintuitive Findings About Motivation That Teachers Can Use



By [Sarah D. Sparks](#) — April 24, 2022 ⌚ 4 min read



— z_wei/iStock/Getty

San Diego

Motivating students can be a tricky, at times exhausting business, but educators say it's never been more important to get students engaged in their learning after years of disruptions.

At the annual American Educational Research Association conference here, global and national motivation experts from education, business, and other fields discussed what instructional approaches and student characteristics make the biggest difference in academic drive. In the process, they have raised questions about some educational truisms about the best ways to incentivize student engagement in learning. Here are a few insights for teachers.

Myth: To motivate students for a difficult task, it's important to make it fun and entertaining

Prior research has found people have a harder time keeping themselves motivated for a “serious” task, like comparing prices, than for a “fun” task like running a fantasy football team, even if, for example, both contain similar math requirements.

But E. Tory Higgins and Emily Nakkawita of Columbia University found that peoples’ persistence in continuing tasks was more closely connected to how well they fit what they considered the goals of the tasks themselves. Participants dedicated more time both to tasks framed and presented as important and those framed and presented as enjoyable. By contrast, they were less persistent when researchers added more enjoyable elements to tasks presented as important.

“The direct educational implication of this is, don’t assume in education that the best thing to do is to surround [an activity] with something enjoyable,” Higgins said. “It depends on whether someone considers the activity fun or important. If it’s considered fun, then adding something enjoyable surrounding the situation can inspire them to redo the activity—but if it’s important, [fun] actually will undermine it. “The idea here is that when you have fit you have interest and engagement in the activity, so because you’re more engaged in the activity, you either intensify the fun, which means you want to do it again or you intensify the importance, and so you want to do it again,” he said.

Myth: A student who needs a bit of a push on homework just needs some advice from their teacher.

Yes, but the student can be even *more* motivated by giving advice to other kids instead.

That's because it's easier to seek help for others rather than for oneself, and easier to learn from someone else's failure rather than your own, according to Ayelet Fishbach, professor of behavioral science and marketing at the University of Chicago and author of *Get It Done: Surprising Lessons From the Science of Motivation*. In a series of studies, Fishbach has found that children and adults are significantly less likely to be able to draw lessons from their failures than their successes, and are more likely to avoid activities they have previously failed or struggled in.

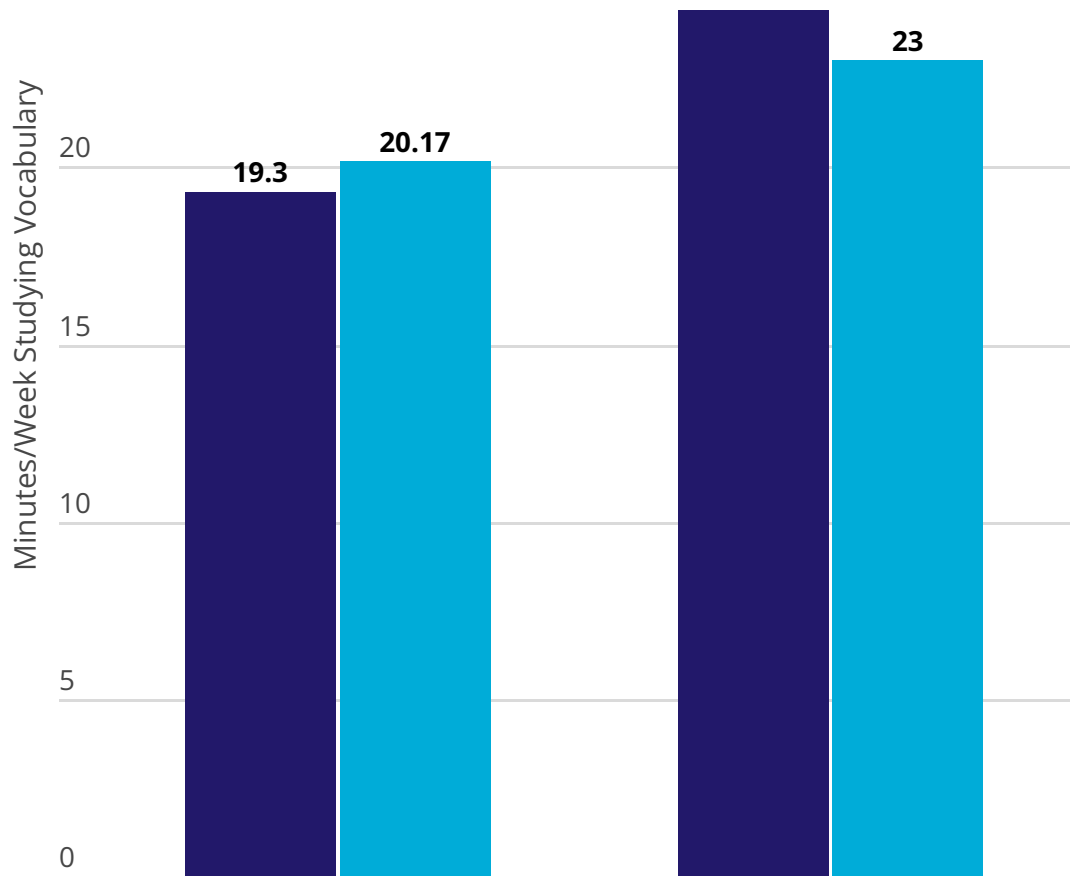
While most people seek advice when they start to work toward a goal, Fishbach found in one series of studies that they can be more encouraged to work toward goals like improving study habits or controlling tempers if they give others help instead.

A Word to the Wise Is Sufficient, but Only for the One Giving the Advice

In one University of Chicago study, middle school students were randomly assigned to either receive written advice from a teacher on how to study and remain motivated, or to write a letter to a younger student, giving their own advice on studying and staying motivated. While both groups of students studied longer in an online vocabulary program in the four weeks after the intervention, those who gave advice to younger peers studied longer than those who had received advice.

The researchers found giving advice provided more motivation than receiving it across several other areas, such as controlling temper, saving money, or keeping healthy habits, for adults as well as children.





SOURCE: "Dear Abby, Should I Give Advice or Receive It?" Psychological Science

EducationWee

“We are consistently motivated by giving other people advice ... and interestingly, people do not predict that they will be motivated by giving advice.”

Myth: Getting students to set goals for themselves is the most important way to motivate them.

To succeed academically over time, students must learn to motivate themselves rather than just relying on encouragement from teachers and peers, but Carlton Fong, of Texas State University, found some strategies students choose are more effective than others.

In a meta-analysis of more than 400 studies of children and adolescents, Fong studied six ways that students try to control their own motivation:

- Mastery self-talk, such as telling oneself you are competent or will perform well on a task;
- Interest enhancement, such as making a game of a task or aligning it with your personal interests;
- Warning yourself of the external consequences of not doing or succeeding on a task;
- Environmental control, such as setting up your work space to reduce interruptions; and
- Proximal goal-setting, or breaking down one long-term goal into smaller interim goals.

He found that while proximal goal-setting was associated with higher academic achievement for college students, there was no significant benefit seen for middle and high school students. Similarly, there was no academic effect for secondary students who tried to align their interests with an academic task to be more motivated.

By contrast, higher academic achievement was associated with students who tried to control their environment, tell themselves they had the capacity to perform well on a task and warn themselves about the consequences of not meeting their goals.

“I think an interesting point that we found was developmental differences, right?”

Fong said. “Maybe with younger students the environment that they’re learning in is perhaps more structured, and because of that, it’s more dependent on the instructor. So you’re not maybe relying on too many motivation regulation strategies for younger students. But we also see that maybe postsecondary students are just perhaps more self-regulated in general and more aware of these issues.”



Sarah D. Sparks

Assistant Editor, Education Week

Sarah D. Sparks covers education research, data, and the science of learning for Education Week.

Reprints, Photocopies and Licensing of Content

All content on Education Week's websites is protected by copyright. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source. For additional print copies, or for permission for other uses of the content, visit www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content or email reprints@educationweek.org and include information on how you would like to use the content. Want to seamlessly share more EdWeek content with your colleagues? Contact us today at pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html to learn about how group online subscriptions can complement professional learning in your district or organization.

Copyright © 2024 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved.