

## Personal Connections



Educational research on motivation tells us that having a close relationship with a caring adult is a significant factor in determining success in school and life. The stakes are even higher for at-risk students: those with learning disabilities or unstable home circumstances.

Creating a personal connection means finding ways to convey genuine concern to students and creating an atmosphere of trust. You are in a unique position to make that personal connection because you work so closely with students. In such an environment, students are much more likely to be motivated to learn.

It is important to be consistent and reliable about our concern for students. Often we become preoccupied with our own personal issues or work matters –understandably – and sensitive or fragile students can be offended by the oversight. Here are some strategies for staying on top of those critical personal connections.

### **Show interest.**

- Write down things you want to remember about each student. As you learn about favorites, preferences or concerns, jot down notes. You might keep a 3x5 card file on students or a notebook or a journal.

- Record birthdates, upcoming special events, or topics you want to ask about at a later date.
- Record observations about learning difficulties and jot down ideas you have to address them.
- Include names of friends and foes.
- Be on the lookout for ways to strengthen your relationship. An animal lover might enjoy seeing photos of your pet; a budding rock star might appreciate a picture and article you find in a magazine.

### **Be nice.**

- Some educators feel they show weakness if they smile before midyear, but that isn't true. Young and old alike respond to a genuine, warm smile and a cheerful "hello" at the start of the day. If you are nice to them, students will like you, and if they like you they are more likely to work for you!

### **Be consistent.**

- Adults show strength by being fair and consistent when dealing with students. Leave your worries at the doorstep and focus on presenting a reliable, consistent persona of support and concern. When students see you are always positive about them, they are more likely to be positive about themselves.

### **Recognize little things.**

- Acknowledge changes or accomplishments with a greeting or a post-it note. (Cool headband, great sweatshirt) Give a "thumbs up" when the student answers the teacher's question accurately, gets back a test with a good grade, or receives a positive comment on a project.

The truth is that on any given day, you could be the only person who shows an interest in a student. And while you may never see or hear appreciation, your connection with that student might make all the difference in the world!

### **Help students manage the “Hidden Curriculum”.**

Sandi could not wait to become a first grader and ride the bus to school. However, two weeks into the school year she began to express a dislike for school, even to the point of tears in the morning. Her mom and teacher talked, but no cause was uncovered. One day Sandi confided in her older sister that she was afraid on the bus, because of the “older kids.” Sandi’s sister told their mother who immediately called the teacher and the search for bullies began. What was uncovered was no bullying at all, but a loud, cheerful group of 4<sup>th</sup> graders who intimidated Sandi by their sheer size and noise. When asked why she continued to sit in that seat, Sandi answered, “I thought I had to. It was where I sat the first day of school.” A seat change was all it took to return Sandi’s cheerful attitude about first grade!

James skulked into class late on a regular basis, without his science notebook or a pen or his homework. When Mr. Harrison asked for an explanation, James mumbled, “locker . . .”. His apparent lack of concern or remorse annoyed Mr. H. and led him to conclude James was uncooperative and certainly unmotivated. He and the classroom aide Ms. Lores decided to be proactive, so she shadowed James one morning as he left homeroom, and she couldn’t believe what she observed. James went to his locker after every period. His locker was a disaster – disorganized and crowded with random papers and folders. In addition, James took the longest, most crowded routes to classes – apparently having no sense of shortcuts. He walked through the halls with his head down and occasionally had to retrace his steps. No wonder he was late and unprepared!

In both situations, the overriding factor was the student’s inability to comprehend “The Hidden Curriculum.” This concept was clearly defined in 1992, by sociologist Michael Haralambos:

*“The hidden curriculum consists of those things pupils learn through the experience of attending school rather than the stated educational objectives of such institutions.”*

Like many struggling students, James was desperately disorganized and had spatial perception problems. He didn't have a close friend to walk to classes with, so he never became familiar with the process and routes required to get to class on time and prepared! His inability to do so fed his negative feelings about school. Of course he appeared unmotivated and uncooperative.

Sandi never considered the simple solution of changing her seat. The teacher learned that two classmates had asked Sandi to sit by them on the bus, but she had it in her head that switching seats was unacceptable and so she endured the discomfort caused by those raucous 4<sup>th</sup> graders.

The good news is that once the cause of the problem was identified for James and Sandi, then staff, family and friends could work together toward a solution.

The bad news is that it can be extremely difficult to identify causes of behavior that relate to the hidden curriculum.

Learning Specialist Richard Lavoie presents a collection of aspects of a school that contribute to its Hidden Curriculum:

- Location of restrooms
- Shortcuts within the building
- Use of library/media center
- Use of cafeteria and lunchroom cultures
- Health office/ infirmary
- Exits and entrances
- Off-limit areas
- Locker rooms/ showers
- Informal location names like "lav"
- Schedule changes and block schedules with cycles
- Fire drill and emergency procedures

So, how does the paraeducator use this information when working with unmotivated and struggling students?

### **Think outside the box.**

- Sometimes our perceptions of student behavior are incorrect. In addition to learning difficulties and home-front struggles, the unresponsive student might be overwhelmed by a particular social or environmental issue that can be remedied.

### **Listen, watch, and ask questions.**

- You are often in a valuable position to observe and identify non-academic issues that are causing trouble and with gentle nudging, you might uncover a problem – the first step toward solving it.

### **Consider possibilities and check for competence.**

- Spend a little time thinking like your students, and looking at the social/environmental aspects of your school.
- Is it a large space with many winding hallways?
- Are there signs that might be misunderstood by challenged students?
- Once you identify possible problems, take a few minutes to check if what you identified is likely to be puzzling your students. Very often a simple exercise or explanation is all that the student needs – someone “in charge” to say it is okay to change a seat or take a shortcut!

### **Accept your limitations.**

- Of course you want to do all you can to help your students, but some things are out of your control. Change what you can, be vigilant about sharing ideas with staff, look for opportunities to affect positive change, but accept the fact that you cannot solve all problems.

### **See the elephant in the middle of the room.**

- There are factors that influence student behavior, motivation and success that are not directly related to school – we all know that. It is a testament to the courage of children that many actually function in school at all given

the conditions they experience outside school. It is difficult to be motivated to learn when a person is hungry, frightened, cold, and in pain. So, what is a paraeducator to do?

**Remember the Buckley/Wong principle.**

William F. Buckley spent his illustrious career thinking, speaking and writing about the modern human condition, and his mantra never changed. He said, "Despair is a mortal sin!"

Harry Wong tirelessly preaches the obligation of educators to be unfailingly persistent and to never write off students. He says, very simply, "You get 'em, you got 'em".

Keep in mind the power of one and the importance of personal connections. Never, ever give in to despair. Identify what you can do and accept what you cannot do.

