

## Understanding and Fostering Achievement Motivation

Supporting students who don't succeed because they lack motivation involves removing comparisons, setting personal goals, and choosing rewards and tasks carefully.

By Laurie McGarry Klose

Jacob's performance in school had deteriorated rapidly. Throughout his previous school years, he had been an average student—not a shining star, but always doing what was expected of him. Jacob's teachers raised concerns to administrators about his lack of effort and failure to complete assignments. Calls to Jacob's parents gave no clues to this change from previous years. Jacob was sullen and unresponsive to questions from teachers, counselors, and administrators. The phrase, "He's just not motivated" began to be applied to Jacob.

What do you do when you are faced with a task that seems extraordinarily difficult? What about a task at which you have failed repeatedly in the past? Do you try your best? Do you give up and walk away? Do you ask for help? What if your performance on that task was going to be publicly judged in comparison to others? These are decisions that many students have to make every day in school. Particularly during adolescence, students are keenly aware of and interested in how their own performance compares with that of others. This awareness, coupled with school experiences, creates the foundation for students' motivational orientation.

Fostering achievement motivation in students is a primary objective of school administrators. A good deal of focus goes to promoting motivation when creating school climate, structuring grading systems, and designing awards programs and policies that recognize effort and achievement. It is also a primary issue in counseling and interventions for many individual students. School administrators can greatly enhance the effectiveness of school-wide and individual efforts to bolster motivation by understanding its development—and impediments—as well as how parents and staff members can best tap into a student's positive motivation.

### Developing Achievement Motivation

Motivation is the underlying reason for human behavior. Adults will frequently lament that a student is "just not motivated" when he or she fails to succeed. When asked to explain what that means, they usually report that the student is engaging in academic behavior that does not promote learning—not completing assignments, avoiding homework or classroom tasks, disrupting others, rushing through assignments, and so forth. In reality, these types of behavior do not represent a lack of motivation, but rather motivation that is governed by something other than the need to achieve academically or behave in a manner that meets the expectations of the adults in the system.

Achievement motivation is influenced by those factors that affect students' perceptions of their relationship to the achievement setting (e.g., the classroom). Several internal and external factors contribute to a student's motivational orientation in the classroom. These include recognizing the relationship between effort and ability, understanding the classroom reward structures, balancing academic mastery and social competence, and choosing tasks of appropriate difficulty. Although research in this area tends to focus on academic behavior—such as completing assignments, participating in class, and so forth—these concepts can easily be extrapolated to understand other behaviors that occur in the school setting.

Students' conceptions about these factors change over time. In early childhood and the primary grades, children focus on self-mastery and competence. More effort to master their environment typically leads to better outcomes. Young children are intrinsically motivated to gain more competence. In later childhood and adolescence, children become

**Laurie McGarry Klose**  
is a professor of school psychology at Texas State University—San Marcos.

Student Services is produced in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Articles and related handouts can be downloaded from [www.nasponline.org/resources/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals).

more externally oriented, more focused on academic and social competence as compared to others. This shift results in motivational orientations that are complicated by the need to protect one's sense of self-worth and the need to continue to gain academic skills or comply with behavioral expectations.

## Components of Achievement Motivation

### Social Comparison

With regard to social comparisons, a positive motivational orientation would be represented by beliefs that personal growth and mastery are more important than comparing one's performance to others. For example, doing well would mean improving on one's best attempt or learning new material. Negative motivational orientation includes beliefs that one's performance is meaningless unless compared to the performance of others. This includes a student's preference for comparing his or her grades to classmates and judging his or her learning on the basis of others' performance.

### Ability and Effort

Concepts of ability and effort are interrelated. Some adolescents believe that ability can be improved by applying more effort, and others believe that ability is a fixed quantity and no amount of effort will change it. A positive motivational orientation includes the belief that one's effort does affect one's outcomes, and a negative motivational orientation is demonstrated by a belief that effort will have little or no effect on achievement outcomes.

### Reward Salience

Reward salience is the component of achievement orientation that reflects students' beliefs

## Responding to Parents

When parents report that their children aren't motivated, teachers can offer the following suggestions:

- Work with your child to set personal growth goals, and develop ways to monitor his or her progress toward those goals.
- Do not compare your child to his or her siblings or others. Speak up when other people make comparisons.
- Avoid rewarding your child's performance outcomes. If you must use rewards, reward your child's effort or task completion.
- Discuss with your child topics that relate to motivation, including failure avoidance, anxiety, self-worth, and individual progress.
- Create connections for your child between his or her school experience and real life.

about classroom and school rewards. Students with a positive motivational orientation interpret receiving a reward as information about performance on a specific task. A negative motivational orientation is characterized by a more global interpretation of the meaning of rewards that includes conclusions about worth, status, and general ability. For example, if students do not receive a reward in the classroom, they assume that it was because they were not as smart as the students who did. They may also generalize that they are not as valuable as other members of the class because of their supposed inferior ability.

### Task Preference

With regard to task preference, positive orientation is reflected by task choices that are

## What Next?

Following are questions to consider with staff members when developing strategies to foster achievement motivation:

- What strategies are currently in place that are designed to motivate students? Do these strategies involve making comparisons among students' accomplishments?
- How are rewards established and used to recognize achievement? What strategies might acknowledge effort and progress without identifying "winners" and "losers"?
- Does our school climate value effort or simply reinforce specific outcomes?
- How do we link academic effort to real-life experiences for students? For example, what opportunities do students have for internships or service learning, and how are these integrated with the curricula?

moderately challenging and offer the greatest potential for new learning. Negative motivational orientation is represented by more defensive choices of task difficulty. Extremely easy tasks present a safety zone where little effort is required and little is revealed about underlying ability. Similarly, students with negative motivational orientation do not expect to be successful on extremely difficult tasks, reducing the negative implications of failure if their expectations prove to be true.

### Enhancing Achievement Motivation

Several aspects of the classroom and school environment have important implications for student motivation. By designing schools and classrooms with attention to motivational constructs, educators can help maximize the probability that students will adopt positive motivational orientations.

### Understanding Rewards

Rewards are a daily part of classroom life. Even behaviors and activities that are not commonly considered rewards, such as teacher or parent

attention, function as rewards. The presence of rewards alone does not alter achievement orientation as much as the significance of these rewards to the students who do or do not receive them. It is important to determine the purpose and function of a reward, as well as the types of rewards that are required to outweigh peer influences.

**Purpose of rewards.** Certainly offering an immediate reward for a specific behavior can produce a desired result. In the absence of that reward, however, the behavior is unlikely to occur. If the goal is immediate compliance, a reward may prompt the desired result. If the goal is to foster an internal desire to complete the activity, offering a reward is likely to be countereffective. The negative impact of rewards is further complicated when rewards are based on competition or are scarce.

### External versus internal motivators.

Competitive rewards maximize the potential for social comparison. If students repeatedly fail to receive a reward, they must employ defensive strategies to protect their sense of self-worth. The students might refuse to participate in the activity, reasoning that if they do not try, no one would know whether they could have achieved the reward or not. They might sabotage others or attempt to win the reward by cheating. Rewards that focus on effort expenditure or task completion are less likely to promote those negative defensive strategies, but tangible rewards continue to foster a reliance on external motivators, rather than encourage internal motivation. Teachers can consider using naturally occurring reinforcers, such as activity opportunities, rather than tangible rewards that are directly related to task completion or achievement.

### Comparison to Others

Charts that are posted in the classroom or at home are commonly used by teachers and parents to motivate adolescents to improve in some skill, such as math test scores or homework completion. Comparing adolescents to

siblings, friends, or classmates may seem to be an innocuous way to let students know how they are doing, but the implications must be examined carefully. A student who has experienced repeated failures or difficulties in school can view these comparisons as extremely threatening to his or her sense of self-worth. Not all students arrive in a classroom with the same level of readiness to learn. For whatever reason, some students are more prepared to be successful than others.

For those students who are at risk of academic difficulties, public comparison can be very threatening and prompt defensive reactions. If a student does not meet explicit or perceived standards, he or she may elect to disengage from the tasks that are reflected on the chart. If the student exerts no effort, then no assumptions can be made about whether or not the student would have been successful. If a student does try very hard to achieve the milestones that are represented on a chart but never quite achieves at the level of his or her classmates, the student experiences a great deal of negative information about his or her performance. Repeated failure can create a sense of ineffectiveness and low self-esteem, further reducing motivation for learning. In addition, when students are not engaged in learning as the primary activity of school, their energy is likely to be directed toward activities that are inappropriate and may distract others from learning.

### Goal Setting and Measuring Progress

Educators can minimize the impact of social comparison and help students develop realistic goals and recognize progress. By working with teachers and parents, administrators can help adults create environments where academic success is valued and encouraged.

**Strategies for parents.** Administrators can suggest that parents work with adolescents on individual goal setting and attending to personal growth. By focusing on what is important to the student and setting personal

goals for achievement, parents can help their children protect themselves from situations that threaten positive motivation. Parents can use information from school—such as grades, class rank, and comparative statements—and interpret what it really means in the context of their children’s personal goals. Then parents can encourage their children to devise strategies that will help them make progress toward these goals, such as improving organizational and study skills, seeking guidance when applying to college, accessing academic support systems available on campus, and informing their teachers of their goals and strategies.

**Strategies for teachers.** To minimize the impact of social comparison, administrators can help teachers emphasize individual goal setting and individual progress monitoring in the classroom. When feedback on performance is meaningful, based on mastery, and delivered privately, students can make accurate evaluations of their progress. If charts are used, they should be individual, comparing the student’s progress to his or her own previous performance and future goals. In addition, individual goal setting and progress monitoring enables teachers to guide student choices regarding task difficulty.

Students can choose tasks that maximize the opportunity for learning and mastery. Students who are focused on individual growth will choose tasks of moderate challenge that offer the greatest opportunity for new learning. Students who are focused on how their level performance compares to others’ may choose tasks that are very easy or impossibly hard. These tasks offer little in the way of learning opportunity because they are chosen to ensure success (such as a task that is easy to do) or negate the information revealed when success does not occur (such as a task that is too hard for anyone to do).

### Understanding Competition

Competition is an inherent part of schools and

For some students, service learning increases motivation by making school relevant to real life. Resources for service learning are included with the online version of this article at [www.principals.org/pl1208klose](http://www.principals.org/pl1208klose)

## Recommended Resources

*Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community*. 2006. A. Kohn. New York: Atria Books.

*Development of Achievement Motivation*. 2002. A. Wigfield & J. S. Eccles (Eds.). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Intervention Central [www.interventioncentral.com](http://www.interventioncentral.com)

*The Motivation Breakthrough: Six Secrets to Turning on the Tuned-Out Child*. 2007. R. Lavoie. New York: Simon & Schuster.

*Motivation: Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence*. n.d. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from [www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/adolescence/partx4.html](http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/adolescence/partx4.html)

*The Myth of Laziness*. 2003. M. Levine. New York: Simon & Schuster.

*The Unmotivated Child: Helping Your Underachiever Become a Successful Student*. 1996. N. Rathvon. New York: Simon & Schuster.

larger society. Many adults feel that experiencing competition in the school setting prepares students for competition in the future marketplace, but the learning environment is not the place to experience those life lessons. Competitive structures negatively affect academic growth, self-concept, and future motivation for learning. Competition implies scarcity of rewards. Winning implies worthiness.

When students are forced to compete in academic settings, they are forced to employ reasoning that protects their underlying sense of self-worth. Failure avoiders simply “check out.” They refuse to engage in the competition, thus refusing to risk evaluation of their worthiness. By refusing to engage, these students are at risk for continued failure and minimal academic progress, thus perpetuating a negative cycle with devastating consequences. Overstrivers exhibit tremendous effort to achieve competitive gains. This can result in temporary success, but can also set up the student for anxiety and negative reactions when losses occur. The overstriver’s self-worth is dependent on winning, not on progress.

**Editor’s note:** This article is adapted with permission from the handout “Fostering Achievement Motivation: Information for Parents and Teachers” in *Helping Children at Home and School III: Information for Parents and Educators* [in press, National Association of School Psychologists].

## Creating Lifelong Learners

Back to Jacob, who has tuned out of the learning experience. Careful analysis revealed that Jacob had difficulty managing the demands for independent study that increase in secondary school. He tried very hard on several assignments and the resulting grades were far lower than he expected. To make matters worse, those grades were posted on the class’s electronic bulletin board, and Jacob and his classmates were able to view everyone’s grades. Faced with the possibility of continued negative outcomes, Jacob protected his own sense of self-worth by not trying, thereby distancing “failure” from his underlying ability.

Following are important steps for principals to consider with their staff members when developing policies and programs to promote achievement motivation in their students:

- Examine structures in the school that promote social comparison. Ask hard questions about the purposes of those structures and commit to creating structures that promote competence and growth rather than superiority over others.
- Create and promote a climate that values all students’ contributions, regardless of academic ability.
- Emphasize effort and growth in all aspects of the learning environment.
- Include students’ rates of growth as part of teacher evaluations.

Each day, students navigate the complex worlds of school and society where high levels of achievement are greatly valued. For a student to attain his or her highest level of achievement, motivation must be intact. Fostering positive achievement motivation should be a primary goal of education, not just a means to an end. By focusing on mastery, growth, personal goals, and competence, educators can foster a positive motivational orientation that can lead to a lifelong love of learning. **PL**