4 (Secret) Keys to Student Engagement

By Robyn Jackson and Allison Zmuda

*Compliant vs. Engaged learners*

Compliant:

* Usually an A-B Student who adheres to what you are doing and completes assignments to a “T”
* Low risk takers-Volunteer when it is safe
* Need some supports

Engaged:

* Asks lots of questions
* Will venture off task to follow their own paths regarding the information presented
* Questions may seem challenging to you
* Share their thoughts unprompted regarding the topic with others and with class
* Non-compliant

Key 1

*Provide Clarity*

* Create essential questions that connect to larger ideas
* Explain relevance of topic/assignment to real life
* Think about learning targets and try to connect
  + Assignment
  + Questions
  + Even conversation in class to that learning target
* Weed out activities that do not directly move students toward the learning goal
* Break down assignment into steps and explain each thoroughly
* Model, Model, Model
* Teacher and student created rubrics

Key 2

*Offer a Relevant Context*

* Instead of offering a “Someday” example, offer a “Today” example
  + Kids will engage if they know what you are learning will help them right now
  + Adolescents do not always have long term perspective
  + Perimeter/Area: Instead of pools or carpet installation—books in a book bag, stuffing things in your locker
* Have students make up right now relevant examples
* This will send them deeper

Key 3

*Create a Supportive Classroom Culture*

* Kids shut down when they see no hope or feel like they cannot succeed
* Students show effort when they have:
  + Time
  + Low-stress environment
  + Collaboration
  + Extreme support from Teacher
* Anticipate struggles and create supports
  + Preview vocabulary
  + Break project into tasks with checklists
  + Provide rubrics for how you will be grading
  + Give sample questions in directions to help guide

Key 4

*Provide the Appropriate Challenge*

* Help kids find meaning in the assignment
* Find a balance between challenge and skill
* Recognize student lives outside of our 50 minutes when planning
* Offer work that cannot be “googled” or found in the app store
* Provide assignments that engage and challenge by asking students to:
  + Frame ideas
  + Create questions of various levels
  + Make predictions
  + Take action to figure out problems
  + Relate to real world--especially their world
  + Interview a hero

Motivating Young Adolescents by Rick Wormeli

*Top 12 Demotivators:*

1. Being told how important today’s lesson will be in high school and beyond.
2. Teachers who talk the whole class period or who speaks in long paragraphs when disciplining.
3. Complex assignments that you don’t have the skills to complete and that have no clear evaluative criteria.
4. Being told what you’re probably feeling and thinking even if it is accurate.
5. Teachers who see teaching middle school as something to do until a job at the HS opens up
6. F’s, zeroes, and other indicators of failure.
7. Spending the day working on weaknesses, without identifying and using strengths.
8. Being treated like elementary school students: walking in lines, clapping hands to respond
9. Anyone belittling your strong emotional response to something minor in your life
10. Classes that claim to be relevant to your life but that deny you access to personal technology during lessons.
11. Unwavering adherence to pacing guides or program fidelity, regardless of individual needs and talents.
12. Sarcasm.

*6 Ways to Motivate*

Technique 1: Adopt two mind sets

* Motivation or manipulation
  + We can manipulate to control through threats or rewards, but those do not motivate
* Mind-set 1: Motivation comes from within
  + Make your room a safe welcoming place
  + Eliminate fear of rejection or embarrassment
* Mind-set 2: No such thing as laziness
  + Humans are wired to perform through demanding complex situations
  + Inside they are very excited about conquering a challenge
  + Laziness is manifested by outside elements teachers do not see
    - Extra-curricular activities
    - Lacking tools for specific tasks
    - Home life
    - Excuses created to save face

Technique 2: Empathize—and build trust

* We have to show students we have their back
* Cannot humiliate when they are struggling
* Instead of pointing out wrong answers
  + Ask for their interpretation and how they got to that answer
  + Respond to wrong answers with-that is the answer to a question I was going to ask later-lead into that topic briefly
* Many middle schoolers still see teachers as infallible—especially early on
  + Build trust and relationships during this time
* Help kids feel like more than a paper you grade or a student ID number

Technique 3: Remember where they are

* Teach developmentally appropriate lessons-DAP!
  + Best practices
  + AVID
  + MAX
  + Tic-Tac-Toe
  + SS Raps
* Kids will forge meaningful connections and enjoy learning
* Students feel teachers who provide these opportunities
  + “Get them”
  + Accept them even with mistakes
  + Empathize
* Motivating teachers and lessons include:
  + Social interactions
  + Switching activities every 10-15 minutes
  + Help students recover from bad decisions
  + Teach topics multiple ways
  + Show enthusiasm about subject even if it is the 342nd time you are teaching
  + Offer opportunities for self-definition

Technique 4: Give descriptive feedback:

* Kids compare everything-it is a competition to them
  + Even if it is silent
* Timely feedback
* Give multiple exemplary examples to start
* Opportunities for self-assessment
* B+ good job on a written paper
  + Not enough-kids want to know what was good.
  + Try to take time to write a small message to focus on details of their work
* Create a feedback-redo cycle—offer the opportunity to fix mistakes
  + This better serves them in the long academic run

Technique 5: Teach the way minds learn:

* Create vivid examples
* Use props
* Fake interviews
* Try to engage frequently instead of “once in a while”
* Show interdisciplinary connections

Technique 6: Tell stories and spark curiosity:

* Adolescents are all about the story—aka gossip
  + Create your lessons narratively so it sounds like a story
  + Love stories about uncertainty and individuals overcoming the odds/persevering
  + Foreshadow with props

\*Not all of these will work individually or every time, but used consistently throughout your day will help engage and motivate our students. I know we will face barriers from students, parents, the educational systems set in place, and the bureaucracy, but using these methods are proven ways to help us daily during the “grind”.