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Student Motivation: School Reform's Missing Ingredient

CEP Report Summarizes Research on Understanding, Spurring Motivation

WASHINGTON, D.C. – May 22, 2012 – A series of papers by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) underscores the need for teachers, schools, parents and communities to pay more attention to the role of student motivation in school reform. While there is no single strategy that works to motivate all students, or even the same student in all contexts, the many different sources reviewed by CEP suggest various approaches that can help improve student motivation, the report finds.

For example, programs that tailor support to individual students who are at risk of losing motivation, that foster “college-going” cultures in middle and high schools, or that partner with low-income parents to create more stimulating home learning environments can increase motivation, the report notes, but only if they incorporate factors that research has shown to be effective.

The CEP report, *Student Motivation—An Overlooked Piece of School Reform*, pulls together findings about student motivation from decades of major research conducted by scholars, organizations, and practitioners. The six accompanying background papers examine a range of themes and approaches, from the motivational power of video games and social media to the promise and pitfalls of paying students for good grades. Each paper covers one of these six broad topics:

- *What Is Motivation and Why Does It Matter?*
- *Can Money and Other Rewards Motivate Students?*
- *Can Goals Motivate Students?*
- *What Roles Do Parents, Family Background, and Culture Play in Student Motivation?*
- *What Can Schools Do To Better Motivate Students?*
- *What Nontraditional Approaches to Learning Can Motivate Unenthusiastic Students?*

“Student motivation isn’t a fixed quality but can be influenced in positive or negative ways by students’ experiences and by important people in their lives,” said Alexandra Usher, CEP senior research assistant and lead author of the summary report and background papers. “How teachers teach, how schools are organized, and other key elements of school reform can be designed in ways that may either encourage or discourage motivation.”

The summary report and accompanying papers highlight actions that teachers, school leaders, parents, and communities can take to foster student motivation. The following are just a few of the many ideas included in the report:

- Programs that reward academic accomplishments are most effective when they reward students for mastering certain skills or increasing their understanding rather than rewarding them for reaching a performance target or outperforming others.
- Tests are more motivating when students have an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge through low-stakes tests, performance tasks, or frequent assessments that gradually increase in difficulty before they take a high-stakes test.
- Professional development can help teachers encourage student motivation by sharing ideas for increasing student autonomy, emphasizing mastery over performance, and creating classroom environments where students can take risks without fear of failure
- Parents can foster their children's motivation by emphasizing effort over ability and praising children when they've mastered new skills or knowledge instead of praising their innate intelligence.

Many aspects of motivation are not fully understood, the report and background papers caution, and most programs or studies that have shown some positive results have been small or geographically concentrated. "Because much about motivation is not known, this series of papers should be viewed as a springboard for discussion by policymakers, educators, and parents rather than a conclusive research review," said Nancy Kober, CEP consultant and co-author of the summary report. "This series can also give an important context to media stories about student achievement, school improvement, or other key education reform issues."

The summary paper, six background reports, and an appendix table outlining the major theories of motivation are available for free at www.cep-dc.org. For further information, contact Ali Diallo at 301-656-0348 or ali@thehatchergroup.com.

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