

Student Motivation

This is one of a series of evidence-based strategies to help states and school districts invest Covid relief aid effectively. Read all 18 strategies in FutureEd's [Covid Relief Playbook](#).

The pandemic has left many students disconnected from school and apathetic about learning. A key challenge in the new school year will be motivating these students to reengage with their teachers, their peers, and their coursework. While motivation is key to academic achievement, programs focused on the nonacademic needs of students may be most helpful in restoring their motivation. Many education leaders are developing plans to meet these needs, using a range of proven engagement interventions. A 2017 RAND Corporation [review](#) identified 60 such programs that meet ESSA's top three evidence standards. Many of these programs help students strengthen skills essential to academic motivation. These include the ability to self-identify and self-assess as learners, which helps students appreciate their existing abilities as well as the purpose and value of lessons. Also vital are skills related to emotional regulation and social interaction, which feed into a sense of connection and belonging at school.

THE RESEARCH

One key to academic motivation is convincing students that academic work is relevant to their lives. In a 2009 [study](#), Virginia-based researchers Chris Hulleman and Judith M. Harackiewicz describe a simple intervention designed to help students make this connection. Hulleman and Harackiewicz measured a group of high school student's success expectancies and initial interest in science at the beginning of the semester and their interest in science and future plans for related courses at the end. They asked a portion of the group to write about how the topics they learned in science class were valuable to their lives. A second group simply wrote summaries of what they learned. The study results

showed that students who had low expectations for their success in science became more interested in the subject and earned higher grades when they wrote about the value of scientific topics, as compared to the students who wrote summaries. This intervention has been [replicated](#) with thousands of students from middle school, high school and college. In each study, writing about the value of academic subjects improves student motivation and boosts achievement.

Another key to academic motivation is building students' self-confidence as learners. Research demonstrates that a student's mindset toward learning—the belief that they can (or can't) handle challenging coursework—can influence academic success. A simple, low-cost intervention has shown promise in helping students achieve a growth mindset, according to a 2019 [study](#) led by University of Texas researcher David Yeager. The National Study of Learning Mindsets asked students from a randomly selected, nationally representative sample of 12,000 ninth-graders to complete two online activities.

In the first, students read information about how the brain can be developed like a muscle through hard work. In the second, they wrote letters to future students sharing what they had learned about the brain. The results showed that students who completed the two activities were more likely to develop a growth mindset and earn a higher grade-point average at the end of freshman year than students who did not participate.

A sense of connection and belonging at school can also boost student motivation. Students without connections to friends or teachers often feel out of place in the classroom. This is also true for non-White students who

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infer they aren't respected or wanted at school. Over time these inferences can erode student well-being and success, as misconduct is more common among students who lack trust in teachers and administrators.

Reassuring students they are valued and respected can lead to better engagement and outcomes, according to a 2019 [study](#) led by Stanford University's J. Parker Goyer. In one experiment at middle schools with large Latinx populations, seventh-grade boys read letters from older students about their challenges with belonging and with the academic transition to middle school. The seventh-graders then wrote their own letters for the following year's class. The researchers combined this belonging exercise with a growth mindset intervention, as well as an effort to have the boys affirm their values. The combined interventions led to a 57 percent decline in disciplinary cases for Latino boys, compared to their peers in similar classrooms. A second study, in a school with a large Black population, tested the social-belonging aspect with sixth-graders and found a 65 percent decline in disciplinary citations for Black boys, particularly in subjective categories like insubordination. Over seven years, it narrowed the discipline disparity with White boys by 75 percent.

WHAT TO CONSIDER

Before school districts choose an intervention or social-emotional learning program, they should assess the needs of their students and staff. [School climate surveys](#) can provide detailed information on student mindsets and sense of belonging, as well as the safety and health of the school climate.

RESEARCH

- [A National Experiment Reveals Where a Growth Mindset Improves Achievement: **STRONG**](#)
- [Promoting Interest and Performance in High School Science Classes: **PROMISING**](#)
- [Making Connections: Replicating and Extending the Utility Value Intervention in the Classroom: **PROMISING**](#)
- [Targeted Identity-Safety Interventions Cause Lasting Reductions in Discipline Citations among Negatively Stereotyped Boys: **STRONG**](#)

RESOURCES

- [Evidence-Based Practices for Assessing Students' Social and Emotional Well-Being](#)
- [Motivation Matters: How New Research Can Help Teachers Boost Student Engagement](#)
- [What We Know about Purpose & Relevance from Scientific Research](#)
- [Build Connections for Classrooms Guide](#)
- [Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research of Belonging-Supportive Learning Environments](#)
- [Social and Emotional Learning Interventions](#)
- [Interactive SEL Framework](#)
- [Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging-Supportive Learning Environments](#)