



# School Improvement Booster

An e-newsletter provided by  
Iowa School Finance Information Services (ISFIS)

March/April 2013: Student Motivation

This School Improvement Booster is focused on **Student Motivation**, that elusive characteristic we often accuse students of not having. Read what one Iowa teacher has done to address this issue and learn what the research says about student motivation. You might be surprised!

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## Find us on Facebook and Twitter!

We are constantly adding information to our Facebook and Twitter accounts – politics, finance, school improvement and other interesting “stuff” that strikes our fancy. Our Facebook account can be reached by typing in *Iowa School Finance Information Services -ISFIS* in the Facebook search function. Our Twitter feed is *@ISFISInc*. We invite you to join the fun, “like” us, and repost the feeds that you find interesting.

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If you have questions about the School Improvement Booster, please contact Susie Olesen at [susie.olesen@isfis.net](mailto:susie.olesen@isfis.net).

## Student Motivation

We recently heard a story about a student – we’ll call him Connor - who is taking chemistry for the second time this semester in an Iowa school. The first time he took the class, he didn’t do the work, regularly skipped, slept when he was there, and received a D. The second time around he’s carrying a B+ and an A is within reach, according to the teacher. Why? The intuitive answer would be that Connor realized the error of his ways. That thinking suggests that by receiving the poor grade, Connor was inspired into trying harder – the grade gave him just the kick he needed to get with the program. That intuitive answer puts all the responsibility in Connor’s court. It is a lament we often hear, “Kids can’t learn if they aren’t motivated to do the work.” Implicit in the statement is this, “And I can’t do anything about their lack of motivation.” *(cont’d on Page 2)*

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But we invite you to think differently about this real-life experience. First, consider this additional information about our student, Connor. He doesn't give a whit about grades. This new chemistry class he's taking is two semesters jammed into one; the pace and rigor have increased dramatically. According to Connor, the teacher makes the class very interesting and he says that while he didn't like her at first, she's a "really good teacher and sure knows a lot about chemistry." He's so interested that he goes most days, does the expected work, and has slept only once in class. The teacher told Connor's parents he could be a chemist, and we suspect Connor feels that confidence the teacher has in him.

But it turns out that while Connor is currently very successful in chemistry, his performance in other classes is mixed. Some As, some Fs. All the grades seem to be related to how the class is designed, the teachers' knowledge and skill in the subject area, and the teachers' ability to connect with Connor at some level. Is Connor a bright kid? Yes. Is Connor easy to teach? No. Is our future linked to the success of Connor and other students like him? Absolutely. This story, and the information that follows, help us question the idea of students being motivated by grades and punishment. We have to look deeper at motivation and how it impacts student learning to reach future chemists like Connor.

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## Center for Education Policy

Alexander Usher and Nancy Kober, writing for the Center for Education Policy, released a report in May of 2012, *Student Motivation: An Overlooked Piece of School Reform*, outlining the factors that impact student motivation:

- **Competence** — The student believes he or she has the ability to complete the task.
- **Control/autonomy** — The student feels in control by seeing a direct link between his or her actions and an outcome and retains autonomy by having some choice about whether or how to undertake the task.
- **Interest/value** — The student has some interest in the task or sees the value of completing it.
- **Relatedness** — Completing the task brings the student social rewards, such as a sense of belonging to a classroom or other desired social group or approval from a person of social importance to the student.

Sources: Bandura, 1996; Dweck, 2010; Murray, 2011; Pintrich, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seifert, 2004

The report goes on to identify teacher actions from the research that motivate students. They note, "... (T)eachers can influence students' motivation through their teaching styles, classroom management, interactions with students, and expectations and beliefs."

- "Teachers can increase motivation by encouraging students to do their best, setting high expectations, allowing students some choice where possible, and using lessons that involve higher-order thinking, collaboration, and student participation, among other strategies (National Research Council, 2004).
- "Teachers who are most effective at diagnosing and improving student motivation tend to focus on interpersonal dealings with students, link education with things students value, and encourage autonomy more than control in their classrooms (Hardré & Sullivan, 2009).
- "Students are more motivated by teachers whom they perceive as caring (Wentzel, 1997).
- "According to a study of programs that provided intensive professional development to teachers, students were more engaged, performed better, and had higher self-confidence when their teachers emphasized student mastery (of attainable, describable outcomes like writing a descriptive paragraph) over grades and performance (i.e. high stakes assessments) and encouraged students to take on challenges (Stipek et al., 1998)."

It might be helpful to read the entire [report](#) with your leadership team and respond to these questions:

- Can our school staff affect student motivation?
- Do we?
- Do we have in place the expectations identified from the research?
- If not, how can we start implementing those expectations?
- How can we build lessons that have the elements of motivation included in the plan?
- What supports will we need to ensure practices that motivate students?

## Motivation in Action in Iowa

Alex Hanson, a teacher in Waterloo, provides a report to his students (through [Skills Iowa](#)) that identifies the student's individual performance on Common Core standards on the reading and math benchmarks, given monthly in reading and three times annually in math. The students highlight the areas in which they are challenged, and since the standards are very descriptive, Alex and his students can speak concretely about what the student must do in order to improve performance. Alex notes, "Students do all the highlighting and we have conversations over what they highlighted. They then get to put their information on a bar graph and they put a few notes down on what they want to work on before their midyear. We then pull this back out periodically throughout the year during small group time and conference about the progress we are making and if we need to add anything to our goals... This is all student driven. All I ever need to do is ask guiding questions. Students keep these goal sheets in their student portfolios and they reflect in writing in their portfolios once a week about what goal they are currently working on." Alex makes short assessments for the students in Skills Iowa so they can regularly see how they are progressing and uses other data as well. Alex has reported student glee over progress and re-commitment to improve when the progress hasn't yet occurred. This fine Iowa teacher uses data to motivate his students, but it is data that the students can describe and learn about, not just a number.

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## Mindset: Research on Motivation

Carol Dweck, researcher who has done extensive research in motivation at both Columbia and Stanford, discusses her work in this [short video](#). She shares her idea that intelligence isn't fixed – that it is developed and expanded as students learn and experience. "The growth mindset, the understanding of intelligence and abilities as qualities we can develop, has been shown over and over to have powerful ramifications on student motivation and learning, and school success. When teachers and students focus on improvement rather than on whether they're smart, kids learn a lot more."

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## TED Talks on Motivation: Daniel Pink and Dan Ariely

These TED Talks [Daniel Pink](#) and [Dan Ariely](#) on motivation are focused on the business world, but there are certainly nuggets that relate to education.

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## Other Resources

### Edutopia on Teacher Development and Leadership Research Review

Edutopia has just published a concise [review of the research on effective teacher development](#). They identify three keys to educator success:

- Effective administrator and teacher leadership
- Job-embedded professional development
- Professional learning communities

Once again we were struck by the need for both professional development and professional learning communities, not just one or the other.

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## Apps and Websites

### Video Physics

*eClassroom News* highlights Vernier Video Physics, "Finalist for 'Best Educational Use of a Mobile Device,' Video Physics brings physics video analysis to iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad. Users can take a video of an object in motion, mark its position frame by frame, and set up the scale using a known distance. Video Physics then draws trajectory, position, and velocity graphs for the object." Physics students, physics teachers, and the just plain old interested might find this delightful. (*cont'd on Page 4*)

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## Google Science Fair

[Google Science Fair](#) is looking for ideas from students age 13 – 18 that will “change the world.” Previous winners investigated impact of air pollutants on people with asthma and helping the hearing impaired experience music, among others.

## The Edifier

[The Edifier](#) is a blog written by Patte Barth from the Center for Public Education. She recently posted two fine comments, one on [professional development](#) that translates into improved classroom practice and the other a helpful discussion on [what's going on in Finland](#).

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## Skills Iowa Support for Summer Learning

Last summer Skills Iowa provided a class in a local district where teachers received recertification credit. We thought more of you might find this useful, so we are offering these classes this summer at your school sites if you are interested. You are certainly welcome to invite other districts in your area to participate.

- **Skills Iowa Looks at Student Work:** This class would be facilitated by Susan Westlund and Susie Olesen. It would assist schools in using the Skills Iowa data as a stepping off point into a deeper examination of student learning. Additional focus would be on strengthening the implementation of your collaborative teams, helping participants learn how to provide honest and forthright feedback in the collaborative process.
- **Using Skills Iowa to Get the Data You Need:** This class would be facilitated by your trainer and/or Susie Olesen and would help teachers be more familiar with all of the reports available through Skills Iowa and how Skills Iowa can be used to facilitate the work of your collaborative teams.

If you are interested, contact Susie at ISFIS ([susie.olesen@isfis.net](mailto:susie.olesen@isfis.net) or 641-745-5284).

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## Quotes

“My work shows that people do not thrive in an environment in which they feel judged, but they do thrive in an environment that they feel is interested in their development.” - Carol Dweck

“If you hear a voice within you say ‘you cannot paint,’ then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced.”  
- Vincent Van Gogh

“Helping people accomplish something that they have never accomplished before causes motivation to increase deeply.”  
- Michael Fullan

**And finally a quote that we hope will help assuage the most common lament in schools today – where will we get the time?**

“Don’t say you don’t have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein.”  
- H. Jackson Brown Jr.

*If you have any questions about the School Improvement Booster or suggested future topics,  
please contact Susie Olesen at [susie.olesen@isfis.net](mailto:susie.olesen@isfis.net).*

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