



The Battle over Student Engagement

BY JACK BERCKEMEYER

I can't claim to be a major history buff, nor can I recite all of the major battles of the European Campaign in World War II. But I have learned one important lesson from war movies such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. The simple lesson is this: often, it's the smaller battles that win the war.

In education, we face battles every day. Some are skirmishes between parents and teachers. Some are teacher-administrator or teacher-teacher skirmishes. (You may even see battles lines drawn between teachers!) Others are teacher-student skirmishes.

Granted, no grenades are thrown, there is no hand-to-hand combat; yet constant battles are waged in schools. One of the most pressing of these is the struggle to engage young adolescents in the classroom. I say pressing because it is a crucial victory to attain!

I am sure every teacher and administrator around the world is looking for the perfect tactical strategy that can ensure the victories of completed tasks, finished assignments, and excitement about learning.

Unfortunately, there is no one right strategy for engaging adolescent learners. There are plenty of strategies, tools, and curriculum programs that have been written and tried, yet none has proven to be the perfect device to motivate every student.

Perhaps this is because the "answer" does not at all lie in motivation programs, strategies, or tools.

Instead, we must start with the students themselves.

Several years ago, I was working at Lima West Middle School in Lima, Ohio. The administration had asked me to implement several of the middle school concepts outlined in *This We Believe*. At the time, the school was working on relationship-building and student engagement, along with a goal of increasing student achievement.

I asked if I could spend some time talking with small groups of students about what motivates them and what they like about their teachers and school. To be honest, I was expecting answers from the students such as: "We want better lunches, more

time with friends, and less homework." What was fascinating (and surprising) was the number of really insightful responses from the mouths of the students! I'll share those answers later.

Next, I asked the teachers in the same school to list the factors that motivate their students and to make a second list of what they themselves like about their school.

The answers from the teachers and students could not have been more different. Each group had a different vision for the battle over engagement. It was like watching a general in the army who never listens to his or her soldiers on the front lines.

Here's a great activity to do with your staff and students—I assure you that you'll be shocked by what you learn!

Have each teacher write down five things that motivate students in your building. They'll probably give answers such as hands-on learning activities, time using technology, rewards, good grades, group work, fun activities, and socialization. In some ways they are correct answers.

What Students Say

Here is a list of student responses to the question, "What motivates and engages you? The phrases in bold are students' responses to this question. I've added some of my comments related to their responses.

1. Teachers with a sense of humor. Students want a teacher who can laugh with them and make them laugh. Granted, this is hard to do because the student's sense of humor is constantly evolving. For example, here's a favorite sixth grade joke: "What is green and hangs from trees?" Answer: "Giraffe snot!"

Okay, this may not be funny to most of us, but let's be honest, some students still love the gross and gory jokes. As students get older, they move into the phase of enjoying more slapstick-type jokes—thus, the reason they love television shows in which someone gets hurt or kicked in the privates!

I'm not saying that every teacher needs to be a stand-up comedian. Just realize that it is okay to laugh. It's a way of enjoying your students and showing them you are human. Humor is a fantastic human connector.

2. A classroom that looks like a middle school classroom. Let's get real here; if you still have the poster that says, "Hang in There, Kitten," you might be a little outdated.

I recently visited a building in Ohio where I was greatly impressed by what some of the teachers had done to their classrooms. One teacher had created a small time machine which he would enter and then come out dressed as a character from history or from a story they were reading.

Here's another fun idea I saw: A teacher placed three life-sized toilets in the room so the students could sit and read on the commode. The books were placed in the tank of the toilet. (Wow! This is SO middle school, isn't it?)

Another great example of a student-centered classroom had the front of a refrigerator mounted in the classroom so students could put their work on the "fridge."

Be creative. Keep your mind open to great ideas that are middle-school focused!

3. A teacher who really wants to be there! This answer was like shock and awe! Yet it came up again and again and again. I thought to myself, "How can a 12-year-old kid be so observant about the teacher's state of mind?" But then I said, again to myself, "Jack, you know in your gut that kids have quick and deep insight. They can read attitudes and intentions. They know *real* when they see it."

Do we wonder why students are not engaged in some classes? Maybe it's because the teacher is not engaged and in tune to the needs of young adolescents!

Please note, there were about 15 other answers that students gave. Several are similar to their teachers' answers; however, in most cases, students did not request more rewards and more free time. They just wanted to come to a school where teachers made them laugh, actually liked being their teachers, created inviting classrooms, and communicated respect and a warm welcome—every day.

Winning the War

Maybe it is time that we get into the bunker with our students and really ask them about motivation and engagement. This might mean blowing up a toothpick bridge or digging a trench. It might even mean marching around the classroom.

The war for student motivation can be won. It just takes some serious conversations between the generals and the troops. (The conversation might include a redefinition of "general.") It takes more attention to relationships, human engagement, and classroom climate. Win those small skirmishes, and we just might be able to raise the victory flag! 

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