

Reaching All Learners

Serving Students in the Middle

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I don't know how many of us are excited about standing up and saying, "I'm average," explained Michael Lemrow, principal of Wright Middle School in Columbia, South Carolina. Yet "how this group achieves will have a significant impact on your school achievement."

The largest group of students in most schools consists of adolescents whose test scores hover between the upper and lower extremes. Without the academic labels that focus special attention on the most advanced and disabled learners, average students — the so-called "woodwork children" who tend to fade into the background — get whatever is left over in many schools.

"The share of public-school budgets devoted to 'regular education' — which almost two-thirds of students receive — plummeted from 80 percent in 1967 to less than 59 percent in 1996, according to the Economic Policy Institute," *TIME* magazine reported in 1998. "Average students have become casualties of a spoils system in which every morsel of every school district's budget has a different interest group staking a claim to it."

Several years ago, after the local school district decided to separate academically gifted students from the rest of their peers, Lemrow and her staff worked with the University of South Carolina to learn more about average learners and what teachers could do to improve the quality of the children's education.

Researchers discovered that average students routinely learn in large group settings that don't allow them to stand out or contribute in unique ways. Teachers tend to lecture or supervise "seat work." As a result, students passively receive new information and have few opportunities to apply skills, conduct experiments, or solve complex problems.

In response, the Wright staff made some changes, including targeting the school's lackluster reading scores. From their observations and interviews, the University of South Carolina researchers found that average students believe that their effort, more than their innate abilities, help them get ahead. So teachers told the students what their reading levels were and shared specific strategies for improving their understanding of text. Teachers paired some adolescents with college students who acted as reading mentors, encouraged others to tutor nearby elementary students so they could see themselves as experts, and conducted a parent/child reading night at school coupled with a book fair to encourage recreational reading at home.

In addition, Wright's PTA raised \$30,000 so every teacher in the building could receive training in reading instruction. Schoolwide, students now spend about an hour a day reading both silently and aloud while teachers circulate and offer one-on-one instruction as needed. Lemrow said the effort has helped the school achieve statistically significant gains in reading comprehension and vocabulary development on national norm-referenced tests.



Over time, the Wright staff adopted other motivational techniques. Among them: Giving frequent quizzes so students can break difficult material into smaller chunks. Early in the semester, teachers prepare tests designed to help every student score well. After the first two tests, teachers send home notes congratulating students for having A averages. After boosting students' self-confidence, the teachers gradually increase the difficulty of the tests.

"Threats of bad grades are ineffective with average students," Lemrow explained. "They are motivated by success."

Characteristics of Average Students

- Generally hard workers lacking independent work habits
- Cooperative, well-behaved, like to please
- Blend into classrooms by fitting in or staying in the background
- Wide variation in academic performance; inconsistent
- Positive self-concept
- Believe their academic success is due to effort, not talent

What Motivates Average Students

- Material that is interesting and important more than difficult
- Teachers who care about them and communicate their high expectations
- Realistic targets; teachers must tell them in advance of an assignment what standards they need to reach and how they can earn good grades
- The chance to earn effort grades as well as achievement grades
- Discussions, cooperative learning, research projects, opportunities to move beyond standard "seat work"
- Success, not the threat of bad grades. They need to know their hard work matters.

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