

Improving School Climate

Relevant—and Culturally Relevant—Instruction

Ask teenagers how they feel about school, and the No. 1 adjective they choose is “bored,” a 2013 Gallup poll found. Ask them why they skip school, and boredom again comes up as the top answer, [another survey](#) by the nonprofit Get Schooled showed. Close behind is, “I just don’t like the classes or subjects.” [Research](#) and experience tell us that students become increasingly disengaged as they advance in school, in part because they don’t see why the material they’re learning matters in their lives. This can compound absenteeism, leading to weaker academic performance and higher dropout rates.

One antidote to boredom is a relevant curriculum. In [a 2009 study](#), researchers Chris Hulleman and Judith M. Harackiewicz asked one group of high school students to write about how the topics they learned in science class were valuable for their lives. A second group simply wrote summaries of what they learned. The results showed that students who had low expectations for their success in science become more interested in the subject and earned higher grades when they wrote about the value of their class, as opposed to the students just writing summaries.

This intervention has been tested with thousands of students from middle school, high school and [college](#). In each study, it not only stops the decline in motivation but also sparks improvement in student [achievement](#). However, they did not see statistically significant improvement in attendance. Hulleman’s [Motivate Lab](#) and the [Character Lab](#) have created an online toolkit, [Build Connections](#), that shows teachers how to help students connect aspects of their lives to what they are learning.

Other researchers have shown that cultural relevance within a curriculum can make a difference for attendance. Efforts to teach about the history and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities have generated controversy in some places. Tucson famously ended its Mexican American studies program in 2012 when state legislators said it fomented unrest and resentment. But other cities and states are expanding programs to reach diverse student populations. California is developing a model ethnic studies curriculum that will be offered in every high school starting in 2020-21.

[A study released in 2017](#) by researchers Thomas Dee and Emily Penner looked at students who participated in a 9th grade ethnic studies class in San Francisco Unified School District over a five-year period. The class covered such topics as the genocide of American Indians; the media’s portrayal of Asians, Latinos and African Americans; and the Civil Rights Movement. All 9th graders with grade point averages under 2.0 were encouraged to take the class. The researchers compared students in the class who were just below that GPA cutoff to students just above the cutoff not taking the class. The results were remarkable: The 9th grade attendance rate for students taking the class increased 21 percentage points; their GPA increase 1.4 points and the number of credits they earned increased by 23, when compared to other students.

In Oregon, school leaders have reduced high chronic absenteeism rates among American Indian students [through a program](#) connecting schools with tribal leaders and books and readings by tribe members.