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Kelsey shuts down during math, refusing to even try to solve word problems. James fakes asthma attacks when it's time to head outside to write about nature as part of the science unit. Kevin won't even go look for books for independent reading time. You watched Sarah get started on her writing piece. It was at least two-thirds complete the last time you checked. Now, when it's due, she says she didn't do it. Argh.

Why do some kids seem to spend so much time and energy avoiding work? It seems to make no sense, and it's heartbreaking. These are all kids who are behind academically. Shouldn't they be motivated to learn? Shouldn't they want to put in tons of effort to improve? It's like they're dying of thirst and refusing water when we offer it. They're going to exert effort one way or the other—why not spend energy trying to get better at something instead of avoiding it? Why are some students so highly skilled at self-sabotage?

The better we understand what drives this seemingly odd behavior, the better we can both empathize with and help our struggling students.

Why Do Some Kids Resist Learning?

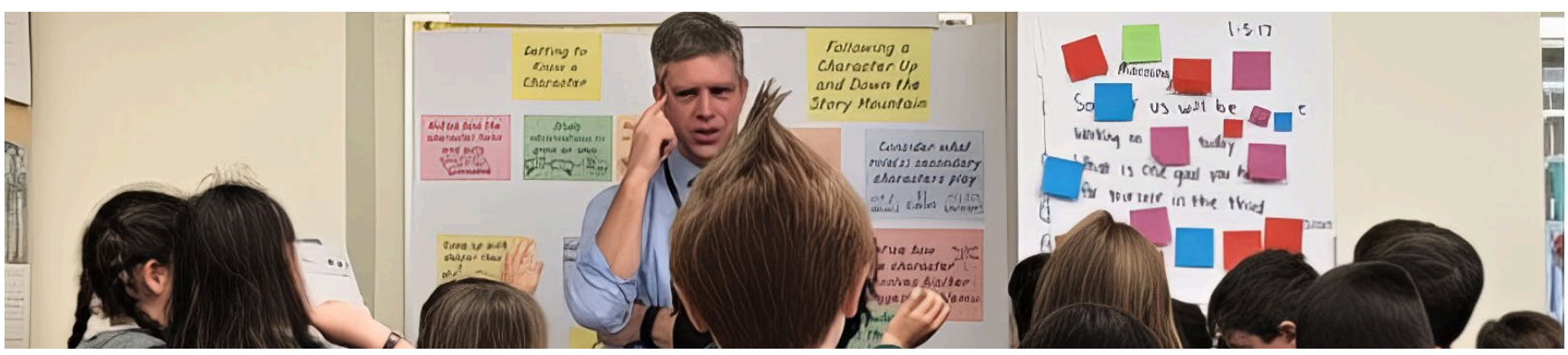
In Tackling the Motivation Crisis (2021), I outline key psychological needs that all humans have and that have direct connections to this important question. Let's explore these briefly to better understand why some kids avoid learning.

Lack of Competence

I would love to be a great dancer. When I see dancing in a play or movie, I think, "I want to do that!" And yet I avoid dancing at all costs. Why? My (quite accurate, I'm afraid) low perception of my dancing abilities is a barrier. I feel so incompetent that I don't want to work at getting better. Sound familiar? Your students who struggle academically want to be good readers, writers, musicians, mathematicians, and so on. If you offered them a magic wand and they could simply tap their heads and be highly skilled, they'd do it. But their perception of their own incompetence is a barrier. They feel stupid when they struggle to read or to understand how fractions work. It's psychologically safer to not try than to try and fail.

Fear of Losing Belonging

The need for connection and affiliation is powerful, and it has been shown that students' sense of relatedness significantly affects their academic engagement and performance (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; King, 2015). Maslow (1943) placed this need second only to our most basic needs for food, water, shelter, and physical safety in his theory for understanding human motivation. If students worry that they'll be embarrassed in front of their peers, they may shut down. They're following the old adage that "it's better to shut one's mouth and risk looking the fool than to open it and remove all doubt." Again, it's often psychologically safer to not try. Similarly, if a student worries that to look like an eager student is a social risk (something they might get ridiculed for), they might actively avoid schoolwork, trying to maintain social status.



Lack of Autonomy

For some students, their lives are often out of control, so they're desperate for any control they can get. If they experience schoolwork as a series of exercises in compliance, refusing to do work may be a way to reclaim some of their power. In the novel Holes, Zero explains to Stanley why he won't talk to the counselors at Camp Green Lake: "I'm not stupid. . . . I know everybody thinks I am. I just don't like answering their questions" (Sachar, 1998, p. 99). When kids don't have any choice about what to learn, how to learn it, or how to demonstrate understanding of learning, it's almost impossible for them to be self-motivated. Too often in schools, kids get choices only after they finish regularly assigned tasks. Or advanced groups or "gifted and talented" students are the ones who get the most project-based and choice-based learning. It's often the case that the more kids struggle, the more adults overstructure students' work, removing all power and control. It's no wonder some kids shut down.

Lack of Authentic Purpose

Many kids can be compliant with schoolwork even if they don't understand why they need to write up a lab report or learn the Pythagorean theorem. Some can't. They might moan, "Why do we have to do this?" or "When will I ever need to know this outside school?" Schoolwork is so hard for them that they need a compelling and immediate reason to try—something more than "It's on the test," "It's for a grade," or "You'll need it next year." This is especially true of students in middle and high school.

Lack of Interest

All kids are curious about something. They have interests and passions—video games, sports, animals, and more. How often do they get to explore these curiosities in school? And how often do they have to learn about things they don't care about? I was observing a 3rd grade nonfiction reading lesson once, and a struggling student dissolved into angry tears when he was handed his reading selection to practice: "I don't want to learn about ants!"

Lack of Fun

Many students struggle with doing things that aren't enjoyable. We all do. A case can be made for the importance of learning to push through tasks that aren't fun. But how much of school should be like this? Students are more engaged when learning is fun, so we shouldn't be surprised when kids who struggle academically quickly check out when it's not.

Why do some of our porcupines resist learning?

It's Often Not About Will, It's About Skill

There's one more important idea to consider as we think about why some students shut down when it comes to learning. They often don't have the skills of self-management, interpersonal skills, or academic mindsets they need to participate effectively in academic tasks.

Your school or district likely has a framework that details the work-study practices that it has identified as critical for student success. Many high schools and K–12 districts have developed "portrait of a learner" or "portrait of a graduate" profiles that detail the core skills and mindsets students should have to be successful. Many states have adopted such frameworks. Several years ago, I analyzed dozens of different programs and approaches that were designed to support the skills and attitudes that students need to be successful in school. The figure below includes some of the skills and mindsets that emerged as I explored these various frameworks.

Skills Needed for Success in School

Self-Management Skills	Interpersonal Skills	Academic Mindsets
Metacognition	Social awareness	Self-motivation
Reflection	Perspective-taking	Growth mindset
Understanding one's emotions	Empathy	Curiosity
Self-control	Collaboration	Flexibility
Managing impulsivity	Cooperation	Perseverance
Stress management	Conflict resolution	Persistence
	Collaborative problem solving	Integrity

Are we actually teaching these skills to our students? And if these are the skills that students need to be successful with academic work, are we embedding the teaching of these skills in academics? Too often, I see schools create or adopt some kind of social skills program that's supposed to teach these skills outside of the academic curriculum. This doesn't work for a couple of obvious reasons. When an extra program is adopted outside of academics, it competes with academics for time during the school day. Teachers are forced to fit it in, which often means having to decide whether to teach their already overloaded academic curriculum or the social skills one. Also, when these skills are taught during non-academic times, they often lack academic context. You can't play a game designed to help build cooperation skills on Tuesday morning and expect kids to apply those skills Thursday afternoon during a math activity. Instead, you should teach the cooperation skills Thursday afternoon as part of the math lesson.

When some students disengage or disrupt during academics, it might look like they don't care about learning, but it might instead be that they don't have the skills of attention, frustration tolerance, persistence, and other self-management strategies required to engage in challenging academic work. Many students already come to school with a wide array of skills and strategies for working well with others, being flexible, managing impulsivity, and persevering through challenges, so they can handle less-than-great skill development in this area. Some kids can't, so it looks like their fault when they cheat in games, melt down in frustration, or give up and shut down when challenged. After all, the other kids seem to do just fine— why can't they? It's a bit like not teaching explicit phonics instruction (which some kids can do without) and then blaming some kids when they struggle to learn to read.

Common School Practices That Throw Gas on the Fire

It's important to recognize that there are some common school practices that make these deficits in psychological needs even more acute. What's startling is that we often use these strategies intentionally, not realizing that they're making things worse. To understand how these strategies feel from your porcupines' perspectives, let's consider how each might work if used in a professional development setting.

Imagine you're a teacher who's struggling. Your school is engaging in a year-long professional development exploration in support of a new program. You want to do well, but it's been a tough year. You've had some personal challenges outside school that have made it hard to teach, and the new program isn't going well. You just can't seem to get to all the parts of the program going at once. There's too much to cover. How would these professional development strategies feel for you? Would they meet your needs for competence, belonging, autonomy, purpose, curiosity, and fun, or would they further erode them?

Ability Grouping

Teachers are grouped together according to skill level. "Low" or "weak" teachers are in one cohort. "Medium" or "average" teachers are in a second cohort. "Highly skilled" or "advanced" teachers are placed in a third. Of course, administration doesn't name these groups this way, but everyone quickly figures out what's going on. How would things go for the low group? Would teachers be highly energized and passionate about growth and learning, or would some feel ashamed and embarrassed? Would teachers in this cohort invest lots of time and effort in this new PD experience, or would they shut down and disengage? Would the group identity form around a sense of shared purpose about trying the new PD initiative, or might it actually form around *resisting* the new initiative? How would your professional morale feel if you were in this group?

Public Praise

You've been really trying to implement some of the new strategies you've been taught. You're gathering with your "low" cohort on an early release day for some follow-up PD. The district coach who had just observed your classroom saw you trying one of the new strategies, so she decides to give you a public shout-out. "I love the way Mrs. Sullivan has been trying one of the new peer-grouping strategies we've been talking about! Great job!" she gushes. How are you feeling right now?

It might be nice to be recognized, but you might also be a little embarrassed. If others in your cohort are not implementing the new program, you might worry you're being used to motivate them. Perhaps you worry about getting some dark looks or even ridicule from others in the group who are resisting the new approach.

Grading

Now let's imagine that the PD committee, in a well-intentioned effort to motivate and hold teachers accountable for implementation of the new curriculum, decides that they're going to grade teachers' work. Periodically, coaches, teacher leaders, or administrators will pop into your room to observe you in action. They'll have an implementation rubric in which they'll tally points according to how well you're doing. These points will be converted into a score that will go into your professional portfolio.

On one hand, you might feel more pressure to do what you're supposed to, but other thoughts might creep in:

— "Great, now, not only am I struggling to implement this new program, but I'm going to get a crummy grade on top of that! I'm already trying to do well…this will just make me feel worse!"

— "I guess I'll try to do what I'm supposed to when someone comes in to observe, but I'm just too overwhelmed to do it all of the time."

— "My permanent record? Whatever. I've seen plenty of teachers not implement new initiatives, and they're still here. What do low scores even mean?"

Homework

Acknowledging that there's a lot to learn in this new curriculum, the school's PD committee assigns homework to help people learn the new program. There are videos to watch, articles to read, and short reflections to write. None of these are overwhelming from the perspective of the PD team members, but you've already got some tough personal stuff going on at home. Just getting yourself to school each day is a struggle, and now you're supposed to do extra work outside school on top of everything else? Now, not only will you continue to struggle with the daily implementation of the new program, but you're probably going to fall further behind your colleagues as they deepen their learning through homework, and you don't.

Of course, there are good intentions behind each of these common school strategies, but when viewed through the lens of the psychological needs of someone who's struggling, the potential downsides are clear. They might make people feel less competent, disrupt their sense of belonging, further diminish their sense of control, and not contribute much to an authentic sense of purpose. These are also just a few examples of common school strategies that may decrease rather than increase your students' engagement and motivation. What others come to mind? Are there strategies and interventions commonly used at your school that seem to do more harm than good when it comes to your struggling students?

So, What Should We Do?

It would be weird for kids to be motivated to do unmotivating work. If it's too hard or easy, if it feels irrelevant, if it's not fun or interesting, if it doesn't provide belonging, and if students have no power or control over what they're learning or how they're learning it, we should expect them to disconnect. Let's explore a few examples of ways we can better meet students' psychological needs for autonomy, purpose, belonging, competence, curiosity, and fun through schoolwork.

Student Choice

There are so many ways to offer students choices about what and/or how they learn. They could choose between two different short stories or articles to read as they explore elements of fiction or climate change. They could pick which math problems will provide them with a "just right" challenge level. Students could choose which pre-writing organizer will best help them get ready to write a draft. Students could pick which writing implement to use while practicing handwriting (a pencil, a pen, or colored pencils). When students have authentic choices about work, they can self-differentiate their learning, which boosts motivation and achievement (Anderson, 2016).

Projects

Projects provide purpose. Let students create simple projects to demonstrate understanding of a topic. Put those out on display in the hall or in the classroom. These could be simple slide shows or poster projects or more elaborate ones. You might even consider a whole-class project, such as creating a movie or constructing a class quilt. We've probably all seen students who often appear apathetic (about unmotivating work) light up when they get to create something.

Teaching Others

In a fascinating study involving college kids, students were tasked with learning complex scientific content. Half of them were told they would take a test and would be graded. The other half were told they would be teaching the content to others. They were then all given a test, and the students who had been learning to teach others outscored the kids who knew they were going be tested and graded (Deci, 1995, p. 47-48). Teaching others what you've learned lends a powerful sense of purpose to work. Consider having your students share with each other or present what they've learned to other classes.

Student Goal Setting and Reflection

Instead of you, the teacher, being the only one to set learning targets and provide assessment and feedback, what if you shared this responsibility with your students? How much more engaged might they be if they set goals about learning and work and had a more active role in evaluating their competence? You might find that students' ownership of work increases. It feels less like they're working for you and more like they're working for themselves.

Conclusion: Work Worth Doing

Of course, there's no one simple strategy or idea that will help all kids fully engage in great learning all the time. If there was, we'd all know it and would be doing it. But this is one thing to keep your eye on, especially for your struggling students. Is the work students are engaging in worth doing from their perspectives? Does it threaten or meet their intrinsic motivations for autonomy, competence, belonging, purpose, curiosity, and fun? How can you make learning more worthwhile?

Note: This chapter is one of several in the first section of Hugging Porcupines *that explore why some kids struggle in school. Two others dig into why some students resist relationships and why they break rules. The rest of the book offers practical strategies for supporting students through a month-by-month walk through the school year. Hugging Porcupines is scheduled to be released by ASCD in May, 2026.*

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Mike Anderson is a career educator, in the classroom with third, fourth, and fifth graders, coaching swim teams, and teaching graduate-level classes. As a classroom teacher, he was awarded a national Milken Educator Award and was a finalist for New Hampshire Teacher of the Year. Since then, he has been working with schools in rural, urban, and suburban settings across the United States and beyond. He was awarded an Outstanding Education Leader Award by NHASCD for his work as a consultant. While Mike is an avid Red Sox fan, don't worry, he is glad to work with educators in Yankee territory. A bestselling author, he has written ten books about great teaching and learning, and in May 2026 he will release Hugging Porcupines: Month-by-Month Strategies to Support Our Most Challenging Students through ASCD. You can learn more about Mike and his work on his Leading Great Learning website.

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