

Example 4  
2/18/13  
The Two Source Essay

### How to Respond to Students Who Don't Want to Learn

Most people would agree that a high school education is a necessary part of life that can only benefit adolescents by preparing them for their futures. However, the agreement does not extend to students themselves. In most public high schools in America, one can find students who, for whatever reasons, do not want to learn and as a result do not do their work or retain the information that they are taught. Educators and parents are concerned about these students not only because they are disadvantaging themselves, but also because in school, the presence of students who do not want to learn makes the learning process more difficult for those students who do. Parents and educators should not be the only ones concerned, however. Taxpayers most likely would rather not support educations for students who resist the educations they are provided. Therefore, educators, parents, and taxpayers all have a stake in how schools respond to the students who do not want to learn. Educators disagree on how schools should respond. Whereas Roger Sipher maintains that students who do not want to learn should not be forced to come to school, others, like Todd Gitlin, would argue that noncompliant students should be treated with a healthy dose of liberal arts education because the conditions in society today deem liberal arts educations necessary.

In his essay, "So That Nobody Has to Go to School If They Don't Want To," Roger Sipher argues that compulsory-attendance laws should be abolished so that students "who are so antagonistic to school" will no longer prevent "more highly motivated students [from] receiv[ing] the quality education that is the birthright of every American." Specifically, he claims that such students' "academic or personal behavior undermines the educational mission of the institution[s]" at which they learn. By abolishing compulsory attendance laws, concludes Sipher, "teachers could stop policing recalcitrant students and start educating," and everyone would be alerted that "school is a serious place where one goes to learn."

Sipher's claim that students who do not want to learn should be separated from the students who do certainly makes sense; separating them would prevent the unwilling students from bogging down the teachers and more motivated students. It seems unlikely, though, that wayward students are such a burden that they actually significantly undermine other students' educations. Despite the fact that Sipher is ready to give up on the students who do not want to learn, most people would agree that giving up on them would have worse results than trying different tactics to get them to learn. Therefore, if the goal were to help the recalcitrant students become more motivated to learn, then to separate them from the more motivated students would be unreasonable because creating classes made up solely of stubborn students would likely perpetuate the lack of motivation in those students.

In the same essay, Sipher asks rhetorically if high school teachers would claim that “recalcitrant students learn anything of value” or if they do any homework. The implied answer to both questions is “no.” Most high school students stay in school and get passed on from grade to grade until they are old enough to quit school or until they get a high school diploma, since many graduate whether their work is acceptable or not. Therefore, they might as well not even be in school. He would probably argue that the release of these students from the education system would not matter much in the long run because chances are, they will not have the will to stick with significant careers. As such, they do not need educations to prepare them for jobs.

I take issue with Sipher’s argument that recalcitrant students learn nothing at school and do not do any homework. I find it unreasonable to assume that a student could come to school and not learn anything. Even conceding for the sake of argument that they really didn’t “learn” anything, simply giving up on these students and letting them quit the education system would prevent them from reaping some of the most basic benefits that school has to give. Just being at school keeps students off the streets. In Chicago’s crime-ridden neighborhoods, some of the kids who do not go to school are on the streets involving themselves in gang activity. Abolishing compulsory-education laws would likely result in more kids getting involved in illegal activity while their parents are at work and teachers are not around. Plus, school helps adolescents develop the social skills that will help them for the rest of their lives.

Todd Gitlin presents a more optimistic answer to the question of how to deal with unwilling students in his essay “The Liberal Arts in an Age of Info-Glut.” He sets up his argument by explaining that in our age of excessive TV-watching, omnipresent advertisements, and sounds and visuals constantly calling for our attention, humans are currently faced with a glut of information. Gitlin argues that because people’s heads are so easily and often filled with such useless information, the liberal arts education is more important now than it ever was. People need liberal arts educations to learn about the elements of the human condition that endure throughout time despite “American restlessness [and] global instabilities”, to “offer some ground to perceive the rest of what you will see,” and to separate the chaff from the wheat. Therefore, the answer is not to give up on those students who do not want to learn, but rather give them a liberal arts education whether they like it or not that will “orient them to common tasks as citizens,” simply because modern circumstances deem it necessary. He acknowledges that “students of all stripes arrive at college with shallow and scattered educations, ill-prepared to learn.” But, “a strong liberal-arts curriculum” could benefit them all the same.

Gitlin seems to believe that the liberal arts education could benefit anyone, even those students that Roger Sipher would so readily release from the school system for good. His claim that any student, stubborn or otherwise, could learn and benefit from a liberal arts education seems more reasonable than the argument that stubborn students do not learn at all. Yet, even if the students benefit from a liberal arts education, there is no guarantee that they will want that education. Unless teachers spelled out for these students the direct applicability and importance of, say, the reading of Jane Austen novels that Gitlin suggests, then the benefits of the liberal arts

education will only go as far as filling those students with information whose importance they do not understand.

What Sipher and Gitlin overlook in their arguments is that students who do not want to learn probably have some underlying issues in their lives that cause them to resist learning. In “This American Life” on NPR, journalists reported on the Chicago neighborhood of Englewood, in which high school students must join gangs whether they want to or not. The students do not imagine great futures for themselves because they have no role models in their community to look up to. They do not focus on school because they have more pressing concerns—not getting shot—and because they cannot make choices in their own lives.

Englewood is an extreme case, but it highlights one way in which students who do not want to learn may have issues in their lives outside of school that influence them to not want to learn. The most reasonable way to deal with students who don’t want to learn does not include giving up on them and letting them quit school, nor does it include shoving an education down their throats and hoping that they see why it is good for them. To deal with such students, schools should utilize their social workers who can counsel these students, find out the origins of their desire not to learn, and then work with them so that the problems outside of school do less to negatively affect their educations.

But, social workers would only be one small step in the process to get the students to muster up the desire to learn. They should be mixed into classes with more motivated students who could inspire them to learn by demonstrating the benefits that come from studying hard enough to learn the material. I was in a regular level biology class during my freshman year, but then I took honors chemistry my sophomore year. The kids in my biology class had little desire to be there, and their lack of motivation made me feel like an outsider when I participated in class. So, I didn’t participate as much. But, in chemistry, the students were much more eager to learn the material, and as a result, participated more and prompted me to do the same. My situation demonstrates how simply placing students who do not want to learn in a classroom atmosphere of motivation could help them become motivated themselves.

And finally, students who do not want to learn should have more elasticity in their curriculums so that they can explore subjects that they might actually want to pursue. Here is what an elastic curriculum might look like for those students: guest speakers, like people who teach how to grow backyard gardens, could come into schools to expose students to subjects not conventionally taught in schools. If schools do not have the money or means to bring in guest speakers, they could take advantage of free MOOCs to expose students to different subjects. Hopefully, each student could find something of interest that could spark motivation to study in a specific area of academia.

Works Cited:

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