By Joseph P. Allen & Claudia W. Allen

Educators have long known that adolescent academic motivation declines precipitously beginning in 5th or 6th grade and spirals downward into the high school years. Although most motivated students plow through (albeit driven more by anxiety than excitement), one-quarter of teenagers still fail to graduate on time each year, despite decades of education reform efforts.

As psychologists, we understand the temptation to attribute this motivational decline to innate (and likely immutable) developmental traits of teenagers. But our recent experience evaluating some remarkably promising interventions suggests that the fundamental problem lies elsewhere—in a profound mismatch between teenage biology and school structure. And this problem is far more solvable than we might have imagined.
Modern brain research increasingly confirms what those who work with teenagers have long known: Adolescents are primed for action, stimulation, and relevance. They seek action as they hit peak physical capacities and energy levels; they seek stimulation as the reward centers in their brains develop; and they seek relevance as they gain the capacity to take on adult-like tasks, both mentally and physically. Yet these normal (and healthy) adolescent traits collide head-on not only with the fundamental structure of secondary schooling, but also with evolving societal trends extending the length of the teenage “waiting period” to truly enter and act on the adult world.

To understand the effect this has on teenagers, it helps to veer briefly into the science fiction realm so popular among adolescents. Imagine for a moment living in a “Twilight Zone” world in which surgeons spend endless years operating only on cadavers, never getting to operate on live humans. Then extend that so that all adults in this world work only at simulated versions of their jobs. Lawyers would endlessly argue only mock cases, plumbers would repair only fake leaks, and teachers would teach only to videocameras in empty classrooms.

Our sense of meaning and intrinsic motivation in this world would quickly fade. Over time, we’d become bored, lethargic, and disengaged. Said differently, we’d come to look much like the teenagers sitting in our high school classrooms.

Truth be told, traditional high school is actually much more problematic for adolescent motivation. To make our simulation truly comparable to high school, we’d need to ask adults to spend years doing little more than reading and listening to others talk about material that is often not even directly relevant to their chosen careers.

This problem has long existed, of course, but as the period of education needed to successfully enter the labor force has lengthened, so too has the waiting period to enter adulthood, making our challenge as educators exponentially more difficult. We may be learning, for example, to teach world history more effectively. But to a 9th grader studying Charlemagne, knowing that the real rewards for doing well have now moved to a decade off in the future can produce a stultifying effect on the motivation to learn. Thus, today’s near-endless adolescence frequently offsets hard-won pedagogical gains.

But don’t students simply need to learn to delay gratification, some might ask? Of course they do, but this delay has now been pushed past the breaking point for many teenagers. This shouldn’t be surprising. Most adults on diets find it difficult to forgo a dessert tonight for the gratification they’ll see on the bathroom scales in a few days or a week. Yet, we routinely ask teenagers to engage in difficult, often monotonous academic work, when the real rewards for their efforts are years, if not a decade or more, in the future.

This problem is not unsolvable, however. With timely enough reinforcement and feedback, even the apparently laziest of young people can become incredibly well-motivated: In fact, if we wanted to, we could even get them to spend hours closely and meticulously tracking meaningless dots on a computer screen ... if we provided them with the second-by-second feedback and challenge of a well-
constructed video game. Compare that immediate feedback and stimulation to a far-off career, or even to the "six letters on a piece of paper," as one teenager described to us what he was working for each nine weeks, and we can see why academic motivation is problematic for teenagers primed to run on more-immediate feedback.

Our analysis suggests that students have far more potential than we realize, but we need to better tailor our educational environments to their unique developmental needs to bring it out. A few examples illustrate the tremendous range of possibilities that exist, and the new directions we may need to take.

The Teen Outreach Program, for example, has for years been engaging young people in meaningful community service that includes classroom-based dialogue with an engaged adult. It’s like volunteerism on steroids, linked to a school setting and providing opportunities for action, immediate feedback, and relevance. Rigorous, randomly controlled trials have shown that this simple change to a few hours each week of teenagers’ lives reduces failure and dropout rates by almost 50 percent. (It also reduces teenage-pregnancy rates to a similar degree, but that’s another story.)

Similarly, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Early College High School Initiative has been achieving stunning improvements in graduation rates among high-risk youths by offering them something real—college credit—for their academic work after 10th grade. This mirrors the incredible popularity and success of Bard High School Early College in New York City, with more academically advanced teens.

Our own teacher-training efforts, co-led with Robert C. Pianta at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education, confirm that getting teachers to attend to students’ needs for action, immediate feedback, and a sense of relevance in the classroom can lead to significant gains in their students’ engagement over the course of an academic year.

Like nutritionally deprived children, teenagers often need only a bit of the sense of relevance and efficacy they’ve been hungering for to see their motivation shoot upward. We don’t need a wholesale revamping of our educational menu to make a difference, but we do need to begin adding these ingredients back into their diets on a regular basis—or at least recognize the problems created by their absence.

Joseph P. Allen & Claudia W. Allen, both psychologists, are the authors of Escaping the Endless Adolescence: How We Can Help Our Teenagers Grow Up Before They Grow Old (Random House, 2009).

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