Lessons from Skateboarders

What motivates young people to master the challenges of sports?
How can we inspire the same level of motivation in our classrooms?

Richard Sagor

As I was driving downtown the other day during school hours, I noticed a group of teenagers practicing jumps and tricks on their skateboards. I stopped to watch, impressed by what they could do with those lightweight, four-wheeled, two-foot-long instruments.

These were undoubtedly the same young people I have heard other adults describe as "unmotivated, with no attention span, and a profound inability to persevere with complex tasks."

"If only he would put forth as much effort in the classroom!" is another cry that I have heard from teachers and parents of our student athletes. We have all seen these athletes pushing themselves as though their lives depended on it. The skateboarders in my community practice downtown every day and continually attempt ever more difficult maneuvers. As parents, we have watched our teenagers spend endless hours playing videogames as they tried to improve their scores.

Youthful dedication abounds—just not necessarily in the classroom.

Recently, I have been talking to the skaters about their sport. I am fascinated by their skills, but I am even more fascinated by their attitude. When they are learning new tricks, they experience a failure-to-success ratio of at least 100 to 1. Nonetheless, they continue to struggle and persevere without any expectation of extrinsic rewards. They receive no grades, no accolades, and no pay for their efforts.

Skaters and Standards

Why don't these young people show the same commitment and expend the same level of energy in the classroom that they do on the street corner or on the athletic field? We often try to figure out what is wrong with these students. Perhaps we need to take a hard look instead at what is wrong about how we work with students in our classrooms.

Although the idea of "leave no child behind" is laudable, few have tried to analyze why so many students *choose* to be left behind. The problem is not trivial; it is larger than a few dozen skateboarders in my community. Recent data reveal that nearly one in four high school students leaves school before his or her class graduates. Among African American and Latino students, the dropout rate is approaching one in two (Greene, 2002).

Motivation and CBUPO

What encourages humans to invest in difficult undertakings? After reviewing research on motivation, I coined the acronym CBUPO (Sagor, 1993) for the five needs that we all have the innate desire to satisfy:

- The need to feel *C*ompetent
- The need to *B*elong
- The need to feel *U*seful

- The need to feel *P*otent
- The need to feel *O*ptimistic

When an activity satisfies those needs, we commit ourselves whole-heartedly. In a landmark study of schools that had succeeded in motivating alienated students, researchers found that the schools had found ways to inspire students with strong feelings of *membership*, *engagement*, and *commitment* (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

Let us look at the downtown skateboarders through the CBUPO lens. Mastering a difficult stunt takes hundreds of attempts. Once the skaters have achieved mastery, they possess authentic evidence of their success. Observers will applaud the accomplishment and may even ask for some coaching. When skaters experience these successes regularly, they cannot help but feel *competent*.

Skaters, rappers, and punks dress in distinctive clothing. But so do jocks and preppies. Common attire serves a social purpose, reflecting a sense of where and with whom people believe they belong. The skaters believe that they are part of a special fraternity. They help, encourage, and support one another. The more they work together on mastering new skills and the more success they achieve, the greater their dedication to the group to which they *belong*.

Skateboarders practice in groups

because they learn from one another and help one another get better. When, for example, Jeff isn't present, something is missing. Yet, when he is there—teaching, demonstrating, and applauding for his friends—he feels *useful*.

Whenever I ask these students how they learned their amazing maneuvers, they answer, "You just have to practice." They tell me that the longer they work at it, the better they get. Understanding the inextricable relationship between one's sweat and the outcomes one achieves produces a palpable sense of *potency*. High-efficacy people know that the secret to their success lies in how hard they work.

No wonder these teenagers invest in the pursuit of skateboarding excellence. It is a CBUPO–rich activity.

Do High-Stakes Tests Motivate?

The theory behind high-stakes tests is that the fear of adverse consequences motivates commitment to excellence. Unfortunately, the theory doesn't work in practice.

Parents who have tried threats alone to control a child's behavior know that they need to offer much more than the stick to get a young person's attention and commitment.

High standards are important, of course, and we should be doing everything in our power to help students succeed with meaningful academic content. What is clear, however, is that if we don't pay attention to what motivates youth and then use those insights to design our approach, we will lose more students than we will save.

Building Feelings of Competence

My skateboarders and most athletes use a very simple measure of their competence: the *personal record*. As athletes invest energy in training and preparation, they regularly break their own personal records. They constantly push for new personal bests. This personal gauge of success is far more important

than how the athlete stacks up against others. If golfers measured their worth by how closely their performance matched that of Tiger Woods, few golfers would feel very good about themselves.

How do most schools and teachers assess students? Do they look at the rate of personal growth—a student's set of

personal records—or do they report on how well the student is performing compared with others?

If the feedback I receive comes only in words like *proficient* (meaning I met the standard) or *not proficient* (meaning I fell short of the standard), will I end each day feeling more capable then I did the day before? Likely not. But
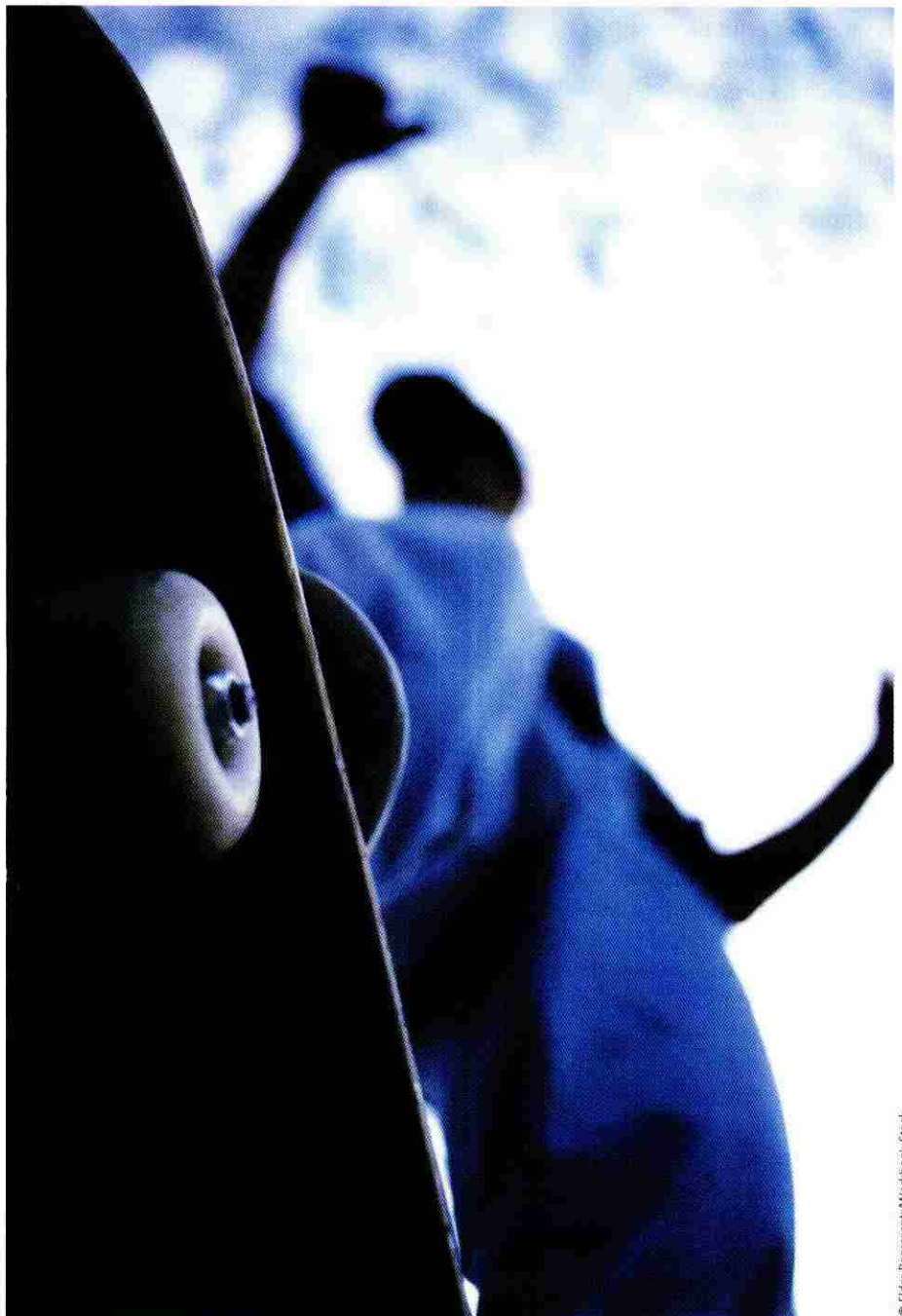
what if I start each day armed with evidence of the best that I have accomplished to date—my personal record? What if I continue putting forth effort while getting continual, credible, and nonjudgmental feedback on my progress? In such a situation, wouldn't I be much more likely to leave my classroom each day feeling competent?

When students who are several years behind their classmates—or schools that are performing well below neighboring schools—receive only normative assessments, they inevitably get discouraged, even when improvement is occurring. Consider the student who was three years behind grade level but has gained 1.5 years in one year's time. After this student's year of extraordinary progress, a traditional normative assessment will still label this student as far behind.

A healthier approach is to assess each student's rate of growth. Take Carol, for example, who is two years behind Amy in achievement. Both have entered 6th grade and told the teacher that they want to attend the state university and become doctors. The teacher knows that if Carol develops at the expected rate of one year's growth in one year's time, she won't obtain the necessary skills by the end of 12th grade, whereas if Amy continues to perform appropriately at grade level for the next seven years, she will graduate on time and be ready to attend the state university.

Coaches encounter this situation all the time. An 8th grade basketball player asks her coach if she has the skills to play college basketball. The honest answer is no. Most good coaches, however, would not be so discouraging because they do not want their athletes to get discouraged and quit. A good coach would make an honest but encouraging assessment:
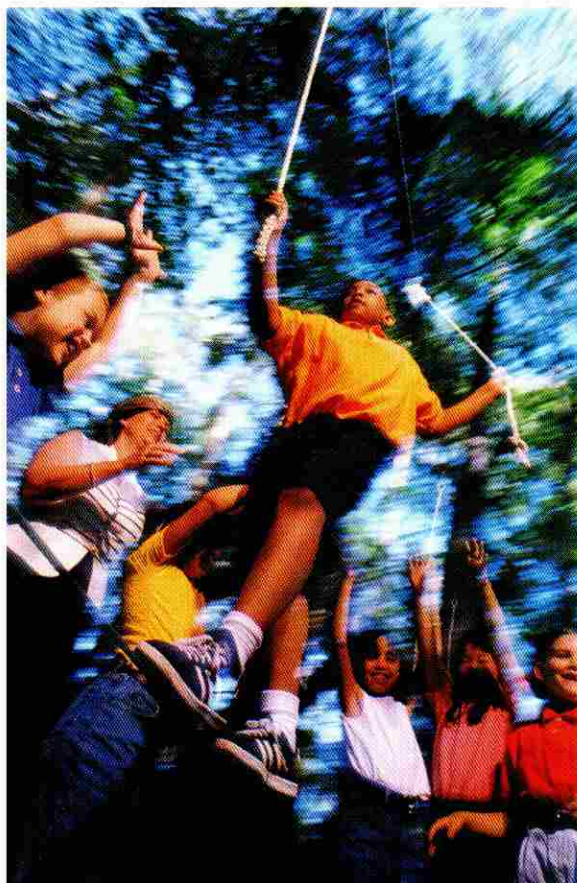
> If we don't pay attention to what motivates youth, we will lose more students than we will save.

You are not ready to play college basketball right now, but if you continue to work at it and continue to progress at your present rate, in five years you may be ready.

The teacher, as academic coach of Carol, should address the issue in the same way:

> Carol, if you don't escalate your current rate of growth, I don't think that you will be ready to go to the university and enter a premed program after 12th grade. If you are willing to work hard, however, I will help you accelerate your rate of progress. If you can maintain a rate of 1.25 years of improvement each

year, you will be right on target to achieve your goal.

Now let's say that Carol takes the challenge and works extremely hard. When we graph her performance at the close of 6th grade, she will be closer to her target. Amy will also be on target, yet Carol actually accomplished more.

But how do their achievements look on the report sent home? The report states that Carol, once again, is "below grade level." She is not "where she should be at this age." She hears this discouraging news even though she is developing at a rate that is far better than average. Will this assessment build Carol's sense of self-esteem and feelings of competence? Not likely.

But assessments don't have to be so discouraging. A good academic coach would show Carol her rate of personal improvement, which is credible and concrete evidence that she is making significant progress.

Building Feelings of Belonging

Some students take to school like ducks to water. They use possessive pronouns— *my* school, *our* choir, *my* coach. Successful at school from their earliest years, they enjoy going to school, and their teachers and classmates enjoy having them there. Unfortunately, students don't all feel this way. Some possess learning styles and have strengths in intelligences that schools rarely address or esteem. Others have changed schools so frequently that they have never had a chance to feel that they belong to a school community. As a result, many students enter our classrooms feeling out of place and uncomfortable.

The schoolhouse is a social environment for youth. Feeling out of place leaves a student with few positive choices. They can hold back and behave as loners in an environment that

defines identity through social relationships, or they can rebel against the mainstream. Early in my school career, I remember fearing that I couldn't measure up, so I did what many students do: I consciously stopped trying. It was psychologically safer to assert that I didn't care to belong than to be perceived as wanting membership in a club whose admission requirements I couldn't meet. I adopted the persona of the disrupter, the bad guy. I believed that if I couldn't achieve status by belonging, I would gain my status in another way.

in past years her low performance has taken down the class average. She also knows that the school is eager to do better; she sees that her teacher is under pressure to bring up the scores, and she can recognize that look on her classmates' faces when the teacher calls on her. These perceptions will not strengthen her sense of personal value.

How can a teacher help Joann believe that she is a valuable part of the class, and do so in a nonpatronizing manner? Anyone who has successfully coached team sports knows the answer. In basketball, for example, often only five

weakest player can make genuine and significant contributions to team performance, as long as he or she is willing to put forth quality effort. The star player benefits from the hard work of the team's weakest link, and vice versa.

Developing a Sense of Potency
Students will work hard if they believe that they have the power to change what happens in their lives. They perceive a connection between effort and outcome. The reverse is also true. Students who believe that other people and random luck determine success have little reason to invest energy in areas where they believe success is beyond their control.

Some students exude confidence that they can meet any challenge. To them, standards are no obstacle. The higher the standards, the better. These students aren't discouraged by a failed attempt because they are confident that if they persist, they will prevail.

Other students, however, believe that success occurs when "the test is easy" or when "the teacher likes me." For these students, failure is not their fault. Perhaps the teacher was "out to get them" or the test was "too darn hard!" For these students, each defeat confirms their sense of powerlessness. My skaters—students who had been labeled as unmotivated, easily discouraged, or lacking in perseverance—learned the connection between effort and outcome through continual, authentic, and nonjudgmental assessment. We can provide the same kind of feedback for all the students in our classes.

Developing Optimism
Intuitively, we know that the best predictor of the future is the past. When certain experiences have consistently been positive, we expect them to be positive in the future. The reverse is also true. When something has been unpleasant in the past, we don't expect it to be any better in the future.

Students who regularly experience CBUPOs at school become engaged in its

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The student who feels excluded by the mainstream is unlikely to invest in its activities. A teacher, however, can pull alienated students into the mainstream by developing a sense of community in the classroom. Democratic classroom practices, such as class meetings and purposeful student involvement in decision making, will bring a powerful sense of belonging to formerly alienated students. Anyone who has visited an alternative school knows that at-risk students can bond to an institution if it offers them a sense of belonging.

Instructional strategies should also invite and not alienate students. When designing learning activities for attaining standards, we must find ways to incorporate all of the multiple intelligences and to address a wide range of learning styles (Gardner, 1999; McCarthy, 1997). When we do, more students will understand that we designed our instruction with them in mind.

Building Feelings of Usefulness
Let's say that Joann is far behind her classmates on the objectives measured by the state assessment. She knows that

or six athletes will get 80 percent of the playing time; several players might never see a moment of action. But the coach knows that the team's success depends on everyone feeling part of the team. The coach may chart each athlete's rate of improvement and point out the contributions—in scrimmages or camp, for example—that each athlete makes to the team's success.

Another approach is cooperative team learning. Developed by Slavin and colleagues (1994), this approach boosts academic achievement and better relationships among students as they become part of heterogeneous teams that compete against one another on academic objectives. Each team, like a sandlot softball team, has an equal number of star players, average players, and players whose skills are weak. With cooperative team learning, students are either competing against individual past performances or against other students at the same level. Points scored above a student's past average are points for the team. Points won in competition against students possessing similar skills are also points for the team.

In this arrangement, even the team's

activities and committed to its goals. Success with obviously difficult tasks builds a sense of personal worth. If we want to help all students achieve high standards, we will need to attend to what motivates young people to spend the time and energy required for success.

We must help students measure performance by rate of improvement, not by comparisons to a mythical Lake Wobegon. We must develop classrooms where students feel part of the community, where classmates benefit from one another's presence and miss anyone who is not there. Finally, students need credible evidence of the relationship between effort and success. None of this can or will occur for at-risk students if they view their teachers and schools as adversaries or judgmental evaluators.

When my young skateboarders and all the other alienated and discouraged young people start seeing educators as

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their guides and academic coaches who believe that students have what it takes to prevail, then they will have reason to leave the streets and return to our classrooms. Only when we make this happen will we be able to leave no child behind. ∎

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