

# The Post and Courier

## Students need to feel welcomed in class

Betsy Flagler

Monday, September 14, 2009

Here's why teachers need to be sure to put out the welcome mat in their classrooms:

From the preschool years on, children who feel a sense of identity within a group are the most well-adjusted and successful in school, research shows.

Students who feel alienated from school are at greater risk for dropping out, avoiding challenging courses and scoring low on standardized achievement tests, says researcher Jeremy D. Finn, professor at the University of Buffalo (N.Y.) Graduate School of Education.

"Disengagement is the failure to develop a sense of school membership, failure to participate actively in class and school activities, or failure to become cognitively involved in learning," says Finn, whose research has included the impact of class size on children's behavior and future struggles.

When cultural history and family are reflected in the classroom, children begin to feel like "I am valued," according to Ellen Booth Church, a former professor and consultant on early-childhood education. She has written several books on education for Scholastic Inc.

Children learn best when they feel they are part of a community, where everyone feels accepted and where individuality is encouraged, Booth agrees.

Steps to reduce alienation and build a sense of belong-ing include: Put materials in the classroom that pro-mote different cultures; use books, songs, puzzles and games that are familiar to the children; establish routines; and promote family connections between home and school.

Finn suggests that problems of alienation detected by his new research can be addressed by changing policies and practices, which would vary depending on the school:

--Foster engagement, student persistence and academic performance through high-quality preschool programs and reduction in class sizes for at least the first three years of school.

--Prepare teachers to ac-knowledge adolescents' struggle for independence and avoid excessively harsh punishment. Provide extra help with difficult course material.

--Increase personal contact between administrators and counselors with students.

--Clarify discipline policies to teachers and students. Minimize zero-tolerance and "no pass-no play" rules that sever what may be many students' last remaining connection to school.

--Encourage teachers to recognize small accomplishments, such as attending classes regularly and getting a passing grade.

--Train teachers to demonstrate the real-world connections of classroom material. Increase student involvement in setting goals and planning course work.

### **Parenting tip**

School nurses and families affected by a potentially deadly form of meningitis have launched a national consumer education initiative called Voices of Meningitis.

The initiative strongly urges parents to vaccinate preteens and teens, who are at greater risk of getting meningococcal disease, including meningococcal meningitis, a rare but serious bacterial infection.

**Betsy Flagler**, a journalist based in Davidson, N.C., teaches preschool and is the mother of a teenage son. Reach her at [p2ptips@att.net](mailto:p2ptips@att.net).

Copyright © 1995 - 2009 Evening Post Publishing Co..