Engaging Reluctant Learners
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For thousands of eager Idaho students, back to school means new clothes, new friends and new opportunities. For countless others facing learning or behavioral challenges, a new school year may equate to dread and despair. Studies show that kids who struggle with school, whether due to cultural, social or academic issues, are at increased risk of dropping out. Learning how to identify these students and provide them with the tools they need to learn and cope can lead to success both in the classroom and in life.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), as many as 15 percent of U.S. K-8 students are held back each year. By the time these students reach high school, they are at increased risk for a variety of negative behaviors ranging from drug abuse to emotional distress. Finding ways to improve retention could lead to huge benefits for students and, ultimately, higher graduation rates.

Larry Rogien, a Boise State education professor and co-author of a textbook on effective teaching in the classroom, said recent brain research points to three main components in engaging learners: relevance, relationships and physiology.

1. Relevance. “Kids live in a techno world,” Rogien said, “but in school there are generally no cell phones, no iPods, and so on.”

By integrating the technology at the core of kids’ lives with the educational process, teachers can appeal even to reluctant learners. One example is a Boise teacher who had students text message themselves reminders about homework assignments, or use their cell phones’ Internet connections to find photos or browse for information.

Another example is two local boys who created a music video to a rap song about Darwin’s four stages of evolution, or the first-graders who learned new concepts by pairing curriculum-based lyrics with familiar Christmas carols.

2. Relationships. Parents are encouraged to be active in children’s schooling through contact with teachers, involvement in school organizations or assistance with homework.

“Kids will do things they don’t want to do for people they really like,” Rogien said. In addition to parents, those people could be grandparents, day-care providers, friends or neighbors.

Talking to kids lets them know that someone is interested in their lives. Rogien suggested asking, “What did you learn in science class?” as opposed to open-ended questions like, “What did you do in school today?” Over time, kids will begin to pay more attention in
class and be more engaged in the learning process in order to have answers for significant people in their lives.

3. Physiology. Science has shown that the brain is based on chemistry.

“It’s not as complicated as it was once thought to be,” Rogien said. “It’s mostly water, which keeps the brain clean.” Despite this clear need, studies show that at least 20 percent of students don’t get enough water throughout the day, leading to a slow-down in brain function.

Providing plenty of brain-friendly foods also can help. Grains, fruits and vegetables that look like the brain — nuts, broccoli, cauliflower and pomegranates, for instance — and foods high in Omega 3 fatty acids can promote a healthy and active brain.

“Leonardo DaVinci wrote hundreds of years ago that a strong body promotes a healthy brain,” Rogien said. And a healthy brain promotes healthy learning.