

Ironwood Education Notes
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This week, I've had the pleasure of working closely with three students, all enrolled in second year Algebra or Geometry, who when they first came here did poorly academically. They are now self directed, motivated, and exceeding beyond their or their parent's expectations. What a pleasure for me! This got me thinking about the difficulties some students have, and here is my two cents worth.

Some thoughts on learning problems-

Students have a good chance to progress academically at Ironwood; successful students generally stay on track and those who have been on an academic slide often turn that around and get moving forward. There are occasional bumps in the road, though. Here are some observations we've made of how those potholes got there and how we try to help students steer around them.

Those of you who took second year Latin in high school know from reading Julius Caesar, that "all Gaul is divided in three parts." Similarly, there are three main groups of learning problems here. The first type is simple- motivation. The second group of problems is due to disabilities, and the third is All Others.

It's an open secret that motivation, or lack of it, is the cause of most academic difficulty. To further fracture metaphors, "you can bring a horse to water but you can't teach it Geometry." Teens arriving at Ironwood have generally had turbulent and difficult lives; one of the first things to fall by the wayside is the desire to study. When they arrive in school several days after admission, we try to set clear and attainable expectations, with rewards and consequences clearly defined. Often times this is all it takes; students are glad in a new and unfamiliar environment to be back studying. It's a piece of the world they've seen before. To allay anxiety, we often tell a student that she or he will not be expected to do anything they cannot do, but everything they are capable of. There is no need to be anxious about lack of study in the past; we'll start from wherever they are. We also point out the benefits of study, advancement in the program, the chance to make up, in parents' eyes, for past actions, and the diploma at the end of the road.

Some students arrive at our school with learning disabilities, documented or not. If we see a student really trying to advance, with tutoring and other help, and gaining little for the time and effort spent, we suspect a physical or psychological problem. Often times, with motivation, these difficulties become less significant, but they never completely go away. For these students, we of course provide any accommodations specified in an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) or Section 504 disability plan, or any others we feel will help. While doing this, we work to convince the student that these problems are something to be overcome or worked around, rather than material for a crutch.

The "All Other" category is as varied as our students.

One problem we see occasionally could be called transition difficulty. Moving from the traditional classroom setting to an individualized self paced program may present a problem. In the first week or two we may hear "I can't learn this way" or "I've never home-schooled before." Our watchfulness and day to day accountability cuts off

the traditional excuses used for poor academic performance; there is no place to hide and just get by. At the same time, we as teachers don't miss a chance to help or tutor. No student is left alone to learn from books with no one to answer questions or help.

Another difficulty arises from discrepancy between a student's transcript record and actual abilities. We see this most often in math, but it is not uncommon in other subjects. A student who may have been socially promoted over the years will have a transcript showing a successful Algebra 1 course, while he or she may have learned and retained little. On the basis of the paperwork, the student should be in Algebra 2, but finds it frustrating and impossible, despite hard work, because of the cumulative nature of math knowledge. The only honest solution at this point is to spend the time going back to get the missed skills.

Medication reactions are another item on the "All Others" category. If we suspect that academic progress is being hindered by unwanted side effects, we pass that information on to Ironwood's nurse or the teen's therapist, for possible adjustment.

There are a lot of other factors and situations I could name. Each student is an individual, with unique abilities and challenges, and we try to make the most of the former and work around the latter. I believe that everyone, young or old, really wants to learn new things, and in fact it's hard to prevent learning. Given peace and the right environment, it just happens naturally.

Reminder- June 6 SAT regular deadline is May 5, with late penalty, May 15. Get in touch with education office for details.