

What schools can do help students engage more in learning

By Chip & Dan Heath

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What makes certain brief experiences in our lives so memorable and meaningful? Let's call them "peak moments": A wedding day. A successful public presentation. An award received for work well done. We spent several years studying peak moments, and in our book *The Power of Moments*, we reveal what we learned: Peak moments share similar elements—such as elevation and connection—and armed with this knowledge, all of us can create richer experiences for the people we care about.

But there's one critical period in life that is missing these powerful moments: the time students spend in the classroom.

Think about it: What do you remember from your experience as a student? Senior musical. Swim meets. Science fairs. Football games. Debate tournaments. Choir concerts. Notice the pattern?

They're all peak moments, representing the culmination of students' work. They're social, often performed in front of an audience, and involve an element of competition or pressure. There's a sense of pomp and circumstance about them—notice how often we actually wear distinctive clothes to them.

Unfortunately, all those memorable moments happen outside the classroom, even though students spend the vast majority of their time inside the classroom.

What school systems need is a massive infusion of peak moments. This is a rare case when we can motivate students and teachers and improve academic outcomes all at once. To see what peak moments can do, consider the work of two teachers at Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, Calif.

In 1989, social studies teacher Greg Jouriles and English teacher Susan Bedford had grown frustrated with the grind of teaching. They resolved to create something dramatic—an academic moment as memorable as the prom. They called it the "Trial of Human Nature," and it continues at Hillsdale to this day, some three decades later.

Here's how it works: One day in class, a discussion of *Lord of the Flies* is interrupted. A visitor distributes an official-looking legal document, announcing that the book's author, William Golding, has been charged with "libeling human nature." The students are told that they will conduct Golding's trial. They will act as the lawyers and the witnesses and the judge.



—Courtesy of Henry Medina

The trial addresses fundamental questions of literature and history: Are people good or evil? Is civilization just a thin veneer over violent instincts? The students prepare for months, and when the day comes, they take school buses to an actual courtroom. The lawyers dress in suits, and the witnesses come in costume, ready to testify as historical or literary figures such as Stalin, Gandhi, Atticus Finch, and even Harry Potter. A jury of administrators and alumni delivers a verdict. Some years, Golding is convicted; other years, he goes free.

The day of the trial is a powerful peak moment: a culmination of preparation and practice, delivered in front of an audience, with real stakes and immediate feedback. Every year, the student speaker at graduation mentions the trial. The prom? It's mentioned sometimes.

Many peak moments fall under the umbrella of "deeper learning," a term that encompasses project-based learning, portfolios, and student exhibitions. At High Tech High, a network of charter schools in San Diego, students don't take exams at all; they present their work at exhibitions open to the public. Their work ranges from theater performances to robotics to self-published books.

If that sounds crazy—replacing exams with exhibitions—ask yourself what more closely resembles work in the real world: the intense collaboration of an exhibition requiring students to frame and deliver a project under deadline pressure so that an audience can view and critique it? Or an exam with 10 multiple-choice and three short-answer questions?

Worse, the knowledge measured by exams seems to have a short shelf life. Consider a study cited by Ted Dintersmith and Tony Wagner in their book *Most Likely to Succeed*. Teachers at an elite private high school in New Jersey found that when students were asked to retake in September the same final exam they'd just completed in June, their average grades plummeted from a B-plus to an F. The students' hard work hadn't culminated—it had evaporated.

Meanwhile, an American Institutes of Research study [found promising results for schools embracing deeper learning](#), including better student-collaboration skills, higher levels of motivation and self-efficacy, and higher on-time graduation and enrollment rates. Better yet, it wasn't just the most academically accomplished students, or those in one racial or ethnic subgroup, who benefited from deeper learning. Students benefited across the board.

So how can we feel satisfied delivering the usual academic experience—one that students, on the whole, can barely remember? If your family took a weeklong vacation that didn't deliver a few long-lasting memories, you'd feel shortchanged. Meanwhile, middle and high school take up at least seven years of our lives. In how many of those years do you have even one fond academic memory, a peak moment that elevated you above the everyday?

These moments are worth fighting for.

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