



Fires in the Mind: What Kids Can Tell Us About Motivation and Mastery

By Kathleen Cushman, *The students of What Kids Can Do*



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Teens talk to adults about how they develop motivation and mastery

Through the voices of students themselves, *Fires in the Mind* brings a game-changing question to teachers of adolescents: What does it take to get really good at something? Starting with what they already know and do well, teenagers from widely diverse backgrounds join a cutting-edge dialogue with adults about the development of mastery in and out of school. Their insights frame motivation, practice, and academic challenge in a new light that galvanizes more powerful learning for all. To put these students' ideas into practice, the book also includes practical tips for educators.

- Breaks new ground by bringing youth voices to a timely topic—motivation and mastery
- Includes worksheets, tips, and discussion guides that help put the book's ideas into practice
- Author has 18 previous books on adolescent learning and has written for the *New York Times Magazine*, *Educational Leadership*, and *American Educator*

From the acclaimed author of *Fires in the Bathroom*, this is the next-step book that pushes the conversation to next level, as teenagers tackle the pressing challenges of motivation and mastery.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

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Amazon Exclusive: Q&A with Author Kathleen Cushman



Why ask teenagers about what it takes to get really good at something?

Adolescents already know far more than we give them credit for! They're learning all the time — from each other, from the media, from the activities that most absorb them, and from their different roles in the family and close-in social networks. We adults tend to think of ourselves as the teachers, but then we look for a kid to help set up our smart-phone! So thinking together about “how to get good” made sense to me — especially in schools. It changes that feeling of “us and them” that can polarize students and teachers. Instead, our Practice Project put us all on the same journey of learning from each other. **What did kids gain from thinking about their own learning in this way?**

It turned a light on in their minds about what they were doing in school. Suddenly they had new and effective ways to give feedback to teachers about what helped them learn. Instead of taking a passive or resentful stance, like “this is boring” or “this is too hard,” they could critique actual practices that didn't work — such

as giving the same homework to all students regardless of what individual kids needed to work on. At the same time, kids also saw how certain classroom strategies (such as researching different perspectives, or collaborative learning) matched the process that real experts used. Kids told me they felt a growing sense of mutual respect for their teachers, especially if the teacher joined their inquiry into “getting good.” **What tips can you give parents and teachers to help motivate students?**

It’s important to help kids stick with practice even when they get frustrated. Three key tips for adults to remember:

1. **Kids want to try things that give them an emotional boost.** Maybe a challenge looks like fun because they can do it with other people they care about – their friends, or an older person that they admire. Or maybe the boost comes from the task itself: a puzzle to solve, a learning game. Either way, something in their mind lights up at the pleasure and satisfaction they anticipate ahead.
2. **Kids won’t do something if they expect to be humiliated.** That means we need to set tasks at just the right challenge level—not too easy, not too hard. And it also means warm encouragement — honoring mistakes as a key part of learning, and recognizing every small step done well.
3. **Kids rise to excellence when they see it.** It’s really important for young people to witness people doing things well in the real world. Take them to watch and ask questions of community experts in all kinds of fields, and arrange meaningful ways (like internships or job shadowing) that they can learn in the company of adults.

How do you find the students you work with?

I have access to a far-reaching network of students and teachers through What Kids Can Do, Inc., the nonprofit that sponsored the Practice Project with support from MetLife Foundation. I looked for very diverse groups of young people with a supportive adult who was willing to bring them together for our sustained conversations. All in all, I interviewed more than 160 kids, in 17 schools in nine cities or towns around the United States:

- **Chicago, Illinois**, where I worked with eleventh graders at the Academy of Communications and Technology Charter School, students at Westside Alternative High School, and a ninth grade reading and writing class at Prosser Career Academy High School.
- **Long Beach, California**, where I worked at Woodrow Wilson High School with 40 members of a leadership club for young male students of color.
- **Rural Maine**, where students integrated our inquiry into their senior projects at Poland Regional High School.
- **New York City** (my home town), where I worked with students at Young Women’s Leadership School of East Harlem, the Queens High School of Teaching, the Isaac Newton Middle School for Math and Science, the Clinton School for Artists and Writers, East Side Community School, and Citizen Schools.
- **Providence, Rhode Island**, where I interviewed youth who played in a string quartet at Community MusicWorks, a neighborhood organization.
- **San Antonio, Texas**, where students from the internship program at the International School of the Americas joined our project.
- **San Diego, Oakland, and Mill Valley, California**, where I interviewed students from (respectively) High Tech High, Youth Radio, and the Conservatory Theatre Ensemble at Tamalpais High School.

Review

“Become passionate’ is easy to say, hard to do, impossible to compel. Drawing on the insights of young persons, parents, teachers, and experts, Kathleen Cushman reveals the paths to passionate pursuit of something worthwhile.”

—Howard Gardner, professor of Cognition and Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, author, *Five Minds for the Future*, *Multiple Intelligences*, and *The Unschooled Mind*

“No matter what stage we’re at as educators, every teacher can mine this book for many helpful nuggets to support student mastery. We can help ignite ‘fires in the minds’ of our kids, and this wonderful book makes an excellent fire starter.” —Kathie Marshall, LAUSD teacher, in *Teacher Leaders Network* blog of the Center for Teaching Quality

"In this remarkable book, Kathleen Cushman delves into the minds of young learners to provide us with an immensely useful, insightful, and indispensable guide to tapping the potential in every child. Essential reading for teachers, coaches, and parents alike."

—Daniel Coyle, author of *The Talent Code*

From the Inside Flap

FIRES IN THE MIND

"When kids are finally given a voice, it's always amazing to me how on target their perceptions of schools are!"

—**Bob Mackin, director, America's Choice High Schools**

What does it take for young people to get really good at something? Teenagers from diverse backgrounds explore that game-changing question in *Fires in the Mind*. As they describe what fuels their interest and effort, they offer teachers exciting new perspectives on why students choose to engage and persist with challenging work. Kathleen Cushman—whose landmark book *Fires in the Bathroom* brought youth voices to the national stage—here asks adolescents and their teachers to think more deeply about how we develop mastery, both in and out of school.

Starting with what youth already know and do well, *Fires in the Mind* uses the latest research on cognition to help students and teachers together address motivation, practice, and the need for high standards. Filled with thought-provoking exercises and resources, this book lights new fires in the minds of both teachers and students, and galvanizes them toward more powerful learning for all.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Luke Shaffer:

Do you have favorite book? If you have, what is your favorite's book? E-book is very important thing for us to know everything in the world. Each publication has different aim or goal; it means that reserve has different type. Some people truly feel enjoy to spend their the perfect time to read a book. They can be reading whatever they take because their hobby will be reading a book. How about the person who don't like examining a book? Sometime, individual feel need book whenever they found difficult problem or even exercise. Well, probably you should have this *Fires in the Mind: What Kids Can Tell Us About Motivation and Mastery*.

Ethelyn Allen:

In this 21st hundred years, people become competitive in every way. By being competitive currently, people have do something to make all of them survives, being in the middle of the crowded place and notice through surrounding. One thing that often many people have underestimated the item for a while is reading. Yep, by

reading a e-book your ability to survive improve then having chance to stay than other is high. For yourself who want to start reading a new book, we give you that Fires in the Mind: What Kids Can Tell Us About Motivation and Mastery book as basic and daily reading guide. Why, because this book is usually more than just a book.

Robert Long:

People live in this new morning of lifestyle always try and must have the spare time or they will get large amount of stress from both day to day life and work. So , if we ask do people have extra time, we will say absolutely sure. People is human not only a robot. Then we consult again, what kind of activity do you have when the spare time coming to an individual of course your answer will certainly unlimited right. Then do you ever try this one, reading ebooks. It can be your alternative with spending your spare time, often the book you have read is usually Fires in the Mind: What Kids Can Tell Us About Motivation and Mastery.

Shari Villa:

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