Climate Action Survey: approaches to motivating students

In Section 6 of the Climate Action Survey we have used research to identify five different approaches to motivating students to undertake climate action. Analysis from the survey will show which approaches are thought to be most appropriate for your school. Below you can find out the research behind these approaches.

a. Policy and rules that ensure climate friendly behaviour

This section builds on research that says policy, rules and laws can be a powerful tool in changing behaviours, and engagement should focus on building support and acceptance of these changes. This view is supported by the 'default bias' where we are more likely to comply with a requirement than make an effort not to comply. Policymakers can leapfrog a decade of slow shifting habitual behaviours by applying outright bans capable of changing behaviour overnight. However, this approach can sometimes have side effects, including a lack of public support. An example includes the 2015 5p charge in England to customers for each single-use plastic bag. Studies have found that all age, gender, and income groups in England substantially reduced their plastic bag usage within 1 month after the charge was introduced. It also led to wider waste awareness with greater support for other charges to reduce plastic waste.

b. More positive communication around climate change

Research has found that emotions play an important role in shaping behaviours, especially when these emotional states involve positive goals and feelings of pride. For example, much of the messaging on climate change has taken a negative tone and focused on invoking fear and other negative emotions to promote sustainable behaviour. But evidence points to different tactics, such as highlighting one's feelings of pride or joy as a result of sustainable behaviour - these can produce stronger pro-environmental behavioural intentions.

c. Social influence

We care about our reputation and how it compares to the status of others - research shows that we tend to follow the behavioural lead of those we feel are like us or we admire. Social incentives and social norms – the idea that we are strongly influenced by what others do (or at least what we think they do) - can therefore be powerful motivators for behaviour. Alongside this our research found that young climate campaigners often feel isolated and powerless, but when they work together, they feel more empowered to effect change. An example of an intervention relying on social norms is the practice of providing homeowners with information about how their consumption of electricity or water differs from that of their neighbours.

d. More and better education about climate change and what action to take

Education as a way of achieving behaviour change, including providing direct advice and information about what people should be doing is important. However, research has increasingly shown that it is rarely enough, on its own, to change behaviour, as it does not take account of the many complex influences on behaviour. In terms of climate change we're at a time of record high awareness and if you were to ask people if they wanted to live sustainably, the majority would answer yes. But if you measured what they actually do, you would most likely notice little change.

e. Structural changes that make it easier to do the right thing

Social theorists say that ambitious change should not just focus on the individual aspects of behaviour but needs to consider social and material influences as well. For instance, people behave the way they do because of the structures around them, and it is these structures that maintain unsustainable behaviours. Social theorists believe if we can identify the key structural issues then we can address them and then mould them to change behaviour. Consider the goal of encouraging individuals to cycle to and from work. Promoting this low carbon practice would require consideration of the full range of social activities and materials surrounding it. This would include the need for a shower, concerns over road safety, the need to do something else after, and the weather. Another theory to take into account is Nudge Theory. The idea is that we can shape the environment so that one option is chosen over another by individuals. For example? Making salad the default side dish, placing healthier food and drink on easy to reach shelves.