

A former Mitchell activities director, Scott VanDerMillen, had a sign up in his office which I used to reflect on whenever I stopped in. It read:

“Don’t sacrifice what you want most for what you want now.”

If ever there were a quote better summing up the promise and the problem of education, I’m not sure what it would be.

Education is all about investing time and energy and blood, sweat, and tears now for something you hope to gain later, whether that be a new skill, wisdom, acceptance into a great college, or a fulfilling and remunerative career. Education can provide all of those and more. But the problem is that children get a great deal of ‘say’ about their education and pointing to life outcomes further away than a few minutes, a few months, or a few years (depending upon the age of the student) can be virtually meaningless. Even if they see the connection between learning their multiplication tables and becoming an engineer and earning a great living and getting the girl or the guy of their dreams, the promise is too distant to affect their decision-making about whether to apply themselves to the task at hand or play another round of *Call of Duty*.

It is one of those problems that just seems impervious to solution, one of those sad, immovable realities in life, like death and taxes.

Except maybe it isn’t. In yet another example of how human initiative can potentially address even the most intractable of problems, along comes a hybrid field of study I have discussed before in this column, behavioral economics.

BE is a combination of psychology and economics, heavy on the economics in my view, which applies the foibles of human reasoning, or lack thereof, to the field of incentives. Classical economics assumes perfect information and perfect rationality to predict human behavior. But then along comes the research findings on loss aversion—the tendency of people to prefer not losing what they have with approximately twice the strength of gaining the very same thing—and homo sapiens quickly look a whole lot less sapien. (This explains, for example, why the seller always feels their car is worth more than Blue Book while the buyer typically feels it is worth less. Until the owner becomes the seller and the seller the owner and, magically, the values reverse.)

The cold, hard truth of logic fails to penetrate our thinking even, often times, when it is bluntly spelled out to us. Add to this the complicating factor of youth and you have a recipe for students all too often sacrificing what they want most for what they want now.

Well, behavioral economics, while not a panacea, is offering one weapon in the fight against student irrationality in the form of a *nudge*, almost imperceptible, inexpensive (in time, money, effort, etc.) changes in how options are presented that channel student behavior into better

outcomes. Sarah Sparks, in *Education Week*, recently reported on several advances made in educational decision-making which hold such promise. They included:

--PSAT reports to high-scoring students on the likelihood they would succeed in Advanced Placement courses led to a 49% increase in student participations in those courses.

--Simple text messages about coming enrollment and financial aid deadlines to low-income high school graduates led to a 7% increase in college enrollment and a 14% jump in community college enrollment

--Teacher engagement in even a brief professional development activity in empathizing and respecting students through disciplinary procedures resulted in student suspensions at half the rate of those who did not participate in that activity.

--Texting the parents of elementary school students about the critical value of school attendance and offering some assistance with getting to school, on any day that their child was absent from school, led to improved attendance for 40% of these students. Additionally, 33% of chronically absent students (missing 10 days or more annually) moved out of that unfortunate category.

The profoundly interesting—and often troubling—aspect of these *nudges* is that they are, to repeat, inexpensive. Monetarily, they cost little or nothing. Even in educator time, they represent a tiny tick of the clock. And what I think love most about them is that they are all voluntary. No mandate, no ban. They are interventions at a particularly critical time in someone's decision-making process that nudges them in the right direction.

Could solving or at least ameliorating the problem of students failing to engage in the behavior that is in their best interests really be that simple?

I really hope so. On to death and taxes!