

# Better Teaching®

Classroom Ideas to Improve Student Achievement

Secondary  
EDITION

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Northwest MAP Regional Center



Bringing Lessons to Life

## For Earth Day, talk trash with students



Students may think that pollution and waste are problems that belong to someone else. This lesson, which you can use in science, social studies or math, may help open their eyes.

The day before you plan to teach the lesson, collect the contents of your classroom trash can. It should contain both recyclable and nonrecyclable materials. You will also need a bathroom scale.

This lesson may contain a certain “ewww” factor. So wait for a day when your trash doesn’t contain liquids. You should also provide students with disposable plastic gloves.

Ask students if they know the only two manmade structures on Earth that are large enough to be seen from space. They may be shocked to learn that they are: The Great Wall of China and one of the largest manmade objects ever constructed—what was once Staten Island’s Fresh Kills Landfill.

Now, hold up the bag of trash you have collected. Tell students it’s the contents of yesterday’s classroom trash can. Next, have students:

1. **Weigh the bag** of trash.
2. **Estimate the weight** of trash produced by the entire school. (If 30 students produced 15 pounds of trash, how much would 950 students produce?)
3. **Estimate the weight** of trash produced by your town or city.
4. **Calculate the amount** in one year. Discuss which materials can be recycled. Next, have students:
  - **Remove the recyclable trash** from your trash bag. Now how much does it weigh?
  - **Brainstorm about the trash** they each produce. How can they reduce the waste products they personally add to landfills?

**Source:** “The Trash We Pass,” Earth Day Network, [www.rprogress.org/education/k-12pdf/thetrashwepass.pdf](http://www.rprogress.org/education/k-12pdf/thetrashwepass.pdf).

Encouraging Participation

## Encourage students to participate with response sheets



Susan rarely participated in class, but her written work and essay exams indicated that not only had she mastered the content, she had insightful observations, as well. Naturally shy, Susan was reluctant to speak out, even when part of her semester grade was based on class participation.

To engage a shy student like Susan, offer the option of completing a response sheet. Here’s how it works.

Have a student who prefers not to speak in class:

- **Complete a one-page response sheet** (2 paragraphs at a minimum) for each class session.
- **Include reactions**, insights or opinions. It should not be a summary of the material covered.
- **Submit it in writing** or by email before the next class period.

When introducing response sheets, explain to students that you will give feedback on their first two submissions, and the opportunity to revise them if you are not satisfied. After that, you will give a participation point and write occasional comments.

This strategy can also work with your entire class. Ask every student to complete a response sheet, then share with partners or in small groups. Or create a non-electronic blog on your class bulletin board.

**Source:** Leah Schanke, “Increasing Student Participation—The Response Sheet,” The Baruch College Teaching Blog, <http://blsciblogs.baruch.cuny.edu/teachingblog>.

Classroom Management

## Monitor student behavior without taking class time



Every teacher has had the experience of repeated disruptions from the same student. Stopping class to reprimand an unruly student provides exactly what the student wants—an audience. Using non-verbal cues can be an effective strategy for modifying a student's behavior.

Nonverbal redirection includes:

- **Moving closer** to the student.
  - **Putting a hand** on the back of the student's chair.
  - **Eye contact.** (Giving "the look.")
  - **Use of a pre-established cue.**
- Non-verbal behavior modification works well because it:
- **Doesn't direct class attention** to the misbehaving student.
  - **Doesn't require a verbal reply.**
  - **Doesn't create a situation** that can escalate into a major confrontation.
  - **Allows the student to manage** his or her own behavior.
  - **Can be implemented right** away.

**Source:** Edmund T. Emmer and Mary Claire Gerwels, "Classroom Management in Middle and High School Classrooms," in *Handbook of Classroom Management: Research, Practice and Contemporary Practices*, ISBN: 978-0-8058-4754-3 (Routledge Education, 1-800-634-7064, www.routledgeeducation.com).

Response to Intervention: Part Two of a Three-Part Series

## Make RTI grouping process more effective



The goal of Response to Intervention (RTI) is to help every student be successful.

Teachers meet that goal by creating flexible groups based on a student's individual progress toward meeting academic benchmarks.

It can be a challenge. Here are some ways teachers have found to make the process easier and more effective:

- **Work with a team.** Don't try to teach all students at all levels by yourself. To meet the needs of all students, you may want to draw on the help of special education teachers, Title I specialists and other teachers in your department.
- **Don't make the grouping process** too complex. Remember that students are not permanently assigned to any intervention level and can move in and out of Tier 2 or Tier 3 groups. After administering an initial benchmark assessment, you

can probably see which students need the greatest level of help.

These students are assigned to Tier 3. A second group that needs less intense intervention will be in Tier 2. The rest of the students should receive regular instruction in Tier 1.

- **Avoid regrouping too often.** Give students eight to nine weeks in their groups before you reorganize. However, if you recognize that one or two students have been assigned to the wrong group, you can always make a shift.
- **Share the work.** Teachers who are working with students at any of the three levels should share lesson plans and strategies. That will reduce the burden on any teacher to develop three separate levels of instruction for every instructional objective.

**Source:** Susan L. Hall, *A Principal's Guide to Implementing Response to Intervention*, ISBN: 9781-4129-5507-2 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Helping At-Risk Students

## Distress at home = academic decline in class



Homes in foreclosure, jobs eliminated, stock prices plummeting—recent months have seen some of the biggest economic crises in decades. Families across the country are feeling the effects. And when parents are under stress, their children are, too.

Your students may be:

- **Taking on after-school jobs.**
- **Assuming responsibility** for preparing meals at home.
- **Babysitting younger siblings.**
- **Coping with angry parents.**
- **Eating less nutritious meals.**

Such pressures can lead to increased absences, incomplete assignments, inattentiveness in class and undisciplined behavior.

If you suspect that a student is facing problems at home, you can:

- **Find opportunities** for private conversations. "Michael, your recent quiz grades are concerning me. Can you stop by during your lunch period so we can talk?"
- **Alert guidance counselors.** They may be aware that a student is having trouble in more than one class.
- **Contact parents.** Frame your conversation to indicate that you are eager to work with them to help their child succeed. Be available at times that work for them.
- **Link students and families** to community services.

Testing Tips

## Students should know *why* they take tests



You want your students to take high-stakes testing seriously. And you probably spend lots of time making sure you have covered the appropriate content. You may have also given your students some good test-taking tips. But have you told them *why* the tests they are about to take are so important and how the assessment works?

Students should know that:

- **Standardized tests are designed** to tell educators how student achievement in one school or class compares with student achievement across the city, the state or the country.
- **Standardized tests can help** educators evaluate a program, diagnose a student's strengths and weaknesses, or determine the need for special placement for a student.

- **Test conditions** are expected to be exactly the same for all students.
- **Some standardized tests are used** to measure whether students and schools are meeting state standards.
- **Test results may determine** whether a student can move to another grade level or graduate.

Explain the terms students will see on test results. These may include:

- **Grade equivalent**
- **Mean score**
- **Percentile**
- **Raw score**
- **Reliability**
- **Validity**

Data from standardized tests can affect an entire school. Providing a clear explanation of test procedures and assessment jargon is one way to invest students in the testing process.

## Resources



Is global warming caused by human activity or is it merely a myth? The subject has become a highly politicized and contentious issue. The topic can be a springboard for great discussion and debate. PBS NOW Classroom ([www.pbs.org/now/classroom/global\\_warming.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/classroom/global_warming.html)) has developed standards-linked lessons. The full series takes up to four class periods, and is designed for social studies, debate, language arts, government/citizenship, and current events classes, grades 9–12.



In 2010 Earth Day will celebrate its 40th anniversary. Get ready by starting earth-friendly practices on April 22, 2009. Need ideas? Go to the Earth Day Network (EDN) at ([www.earthday.net](http://www.earthday.net)). You'll find standards-based lesson plans, school greening tips, grants for teachers and more. An interactive map allows you to read how teachers across the country are using EDN grants for hands-on learning experiences.



Put together summer learning ideas for your students. Start with the American Library Association's "Booklists & Book Awards" page. You'll find reading lists provided by the Young Adult Library Service Association ([www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists)). For math, try the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics site at [www.nctm.org](http://www.nctm.org). Click on Middle School or High School for pages with hands-on activities.

Teaching Tips

## Use consistency for common procedures



In your class, students have to write their names in the upper right corner. In Mr. Jones' math class, it's the upper left. In your class, students may not use gel pens. Mrs. Davis doesn't care.

Is it any wonder that students don't always follow all the procedures you have set? And do you really care where students' names appear—as long as they're all in the same place?

There is no question that students in middle and high school need structure. Setting clear boundaries helps students know that they can meet your expectations.

As you begin to think about the next school year:

- **Call together** a department or team meeting.

- **Talk about the procedures** and expectations you have for your students.
- **Find similarities.** Are there some procedures every teacher uses? (Everyone may have the same rule about chewing gum, arriving in class on time and having needed materials.)
- **Look at procedures** that are different. Can you compromise so you could *all* be consistent?

Creating a list of common procedures will give you all a head start in the fall. You'll be able to give students a clear set of expectations on Day One.

**Source:** "A Little Consistency Goes a Long Way," *Classroom Connections*, October 2007 (National Middle School Association, 1-800-528-6672, [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org)).

## Share an Idea!

Do you have an idea to improve student learning that should be in this newsletter?


Send your ideas to **Better Teaching**, Editorial Dept., P.O. Box 397, Fairfax Station, VA 22039, fax to 1-800-216-3667 or go to [www.teacher-institute.com/ideas](http://www.teacher-institute.com/ideas).

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## Focus : Thinking Skills

Teaching Thinking Skills

### Help students reflect and process

 Your students have to deal with a barrage of information every day. One of the most important skills to teach them is how to reflect on what they are learning: Does this information make sense? Does it relate to other things they have learned? Is it information they can apply in other areas?

As middle school students gradually move from concrete to abstract thinking, they can benefit from time for reflection. Here's how to help:

- **Set aside time** for students to reflect on what they have learned.
- **Provide brief prompts** that will guide students in thinking about what they have learned:
  - ♦ I learned that ...
  - ♦ I didn't know that ...




Illustration by Bob George

- ♦ I learned how to ...
- ♦ I now understand that ...
- ♦ I wish I knew more about ...
- ♦ After learning about this subject, I now want to ...
- ♦ I changed my mind about ...

**Source:** Margaret A. Theobald, *Increasing Student Motivation: Strategies for Middle and High School Teachers*, ISBN: 1-4129-0623-7 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).

Adapting Thinking Skills

### Draw on students' real-life thinking skills

 Teachers are encouraged to create opportunities for students to use content skills in real-life situations. But why not turn the tables?

Students already use higher-level thinking skills every day. Have them apply those skills in written assignments and class discussions.

What higher-level thinking skills? Think about it. Students:

- **Offer logical arguments** to parents about why they should be allowed to stay up later or use the family car.
- **Convince friends** to join them for activities.
- **Justify decisions** they've made.

- **Debate with friends** about sports or movies.
  - **Defend**—often passionately—their points of view.
- Design lesson plans that allow your students to use these skills as they discuss, debate and seek solutions. Teach them that in many situations more than one point of view can and should be considered. Remind them that some questions will remain unanswered or uncertain—and that's okay! In fact, that's what leads to further study and innovations.

**Source:** John D. McNeil, "Five Ways Schools Can Kill Learning," *Education Week*, October 29, 2008 (Education Week, 1-800-728-2790, [www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org)).

Learning Strategies

### KNLH chart can show students how they learn



Teachers have used KWL charts for years. They are helpful as students identify what they **Know**, **Want to know**, and what they have **Learned**.

But in middle and high school, it's also important for students to learn *how* they learn. Did they *read* some information in a book? Did they *see* it on a website? Did they *try* an experiment?

Create a KNLH chart for a given topic. Make the following four columns on a page:

**K = Know** (What I know.)

**N = Need** (What I need to know.)

**L = Learned** (What I learned.)

**H = How** I learned it.

Suppose a science class were studying water. When you ask students to list what they know (K column), they might include *ocean water is salty*. How did they learn that (H column)? They might write *by tasting it*. But they might have learned about water freezing at 32° (L column) from reading a science book (H column).

Have students fill out KNLH charts for different units. They will soon begin to see how they learn best.

**Source:** Donna Walker Tileston and Sandra K. Darling, *Teaching Strategies That Prepare Students for High-Stakes Tests*, ISBN: 9781-4129-4976-7 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).