

Better Teaching[®]

Classroom Ideas to Improve Student Achievement **Elementary** EDITION

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Bringing Lessons to Life

Honor King with 100 Acts of Kindness



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would have been 80 years old this month—still young enough to be a major figure on the national stage. Continuing his message of nonviolence, peace and kindness may be the best way for you and your students to honor King's memory.

Consider doing this with 100 Acts of Kindness. Many schools will also be celebrating the 100th day of school this month. You can tie that lesson in, too.

Here's how:

1. **Make a giant poster with a grid** of 100 squares. Fill in one grid for each act of kindness. Make it a class goal to have the grid all filled in by the end of this month.
2. **Discuss possibilities** with your students. What, in their view, is an act of kindness? Ask for suggestions of acts of kindness they can perform throughout the course of the day. Post the list of ideas in a prominent

place in your classroom. Remind students to continue these kind acts at home, too!

3. **Establish a rule** that students may only report acts of kindness on the part of others. This exercise should not be a forum for students to rack up points by listing their own good deeds! But let students know that you, too, will be watching to catch them in acts of kindness.
4. **Incorporate writing** into the lesson by having students write thank-you notes to those who have been kind to them. Post the notes next to your acts of kindness list.
5. **Remind your students** to continue living Dr. King's dream by carrying on with acts of kindness for the rest of the year, too!

Source: Devon Hamner, "Living the Dream, 100 Acts of Kindness," International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English, Read-Write-Think, www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=259.

Building Responsibility

Don't be too quick to come to the rescue



You've just given students the assignment. You gave directions orally and wrote them on the board. Every student in the class has settled down to work.

Except Taylor. Taylor's hand is in the air before you finish talking.

What do you do?

- **If you rush in too quickly** to rescue kids like Taylor, you're really giving them a "vote of no confidence." You're saying, in effect, "You poor kid. I know you can't figure this out."
- **If you see a hand shoot up** in the air, quietly walk over to the student and say, "I'm confident that you can figure this out. Take five minutes and see how you do."
- **If the student still acts helpless**, suggest talking it out. "What do you think might be a way to solve this problem? Why don't you give that a try?"
- **If a student's failure to take** responsibility for his or her own learning continues, try issuing three colored tickets each day. Say, "You may use one of these tickets every time you need to ask me a question. But once they're gone, they're gone." This way, the student will be forced to make a decision. And you will see if the student really needs help—or if the student is just seeking attention.

Source: Diane Heacox, *Up From Underachievement*, ISBN: 0-91579-335-0 (Free Spirit Publishing, 1-866-735-7323, www.freespirit.com).

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Listening & Following Directions

Nonverbal cues can be more effective



Nonverbal discipline techniques can be effective in keeping a situation from escalating. They may also prevent repeat behaviors: Students are grateful for not getting called out in class. And students learn to pay attention to your cues, allowing self-correction sooner in the future. You can:

- **Use proximity control.** Stand next to the student or make your way toward the student.
- **Put your hand or finger** on the work as you pass the student's desk. Point to or tap the page or piece of work the student needs to focus on.
- **Use facial expressions** and body language. Give the student your version of "the look." Shake your head slightly. Try a questioning look or a slight frown. Change to a big smile when the student cues in and changes the behavior.
- **Change your tone of voice** to attract attention so the student can redirect focus to the task at hand.

Source: Elizabeth Shellard et al., *Effective Classroom Management to Support Student Learning*, ISBN: 1-931762-34-1 (Educational Research Service, 1-800-791-9308, www.ers.org).

Working With Groups: Part One of a Four-Part Series

Have a plan for creating highly-structured groups



Some students work together naturally. They understand the job to be done, fall into their roles and get working as a team. Many others need specific rules and tasks if their group is to be anything but a social—or disruptive—one.

Here are some ideas to consider when grouping students who need considerable structure:

- **Size.** Limit group size to four or five students.
- **Selection.** Students will invariably choose to work only with their friends if you give them the option of grouping themselves. This rarely results in the most effective grouping. Instead, create groups that you think will work well together.
- **Roles.** Give each group member a specific role. Consider choosing one student to be the leader. Pick a student who needs your help gaining responsibility skills. This student monitors the others to make sure they are performing their roles.

Duties include getting the group ready to work (in their seats, no talking) and writing down what each group member is supposed to do.

- **Time.** Give a specific time limit. Make it shorter than you expect students will need. This reinforces the idea that they have to get a task done, and there is no time to waste. When groups are underway and working busily, you can add minutes to the time as needed.
- **Whining.** Yes, you'll have some. So make a rule that there will be no whining about a partner or a task. Make clear to students that those who work well under all conditions will have the opportunity for changes—to possibly more desirable situations—the next time you convene groups.

Source: Brian D. Mendler et al., *Strategies for Successful Classroom Management: Helping Students Succeed Without Losing Your Dignity or Sanity*, ISBN: 1-4129-3783-3 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Teaching Tips

Ask two questions to reinforce student effort



"Where did you get stuck? How did you get unstuck?" These questions were asked by a committee member during a doctoral dissertation defense.

The doctoral candidate was stunned. "How did you know I got stuck?" she asked.

"Everyone gets stuck," the committee member answered. "It's part of the process."

Those are two good questions to ask your students. "Where did you get stuck?" helps them understand that learning isn't always easy. People *do* get stuck. The important thing is to keep working until they get unstuck.

"How did you get unstuck?" teaches the value of persistence. By sticking with a tough problem, students will eventually master it. When that happens, they will enjoy the pride that comes from overcoming obstacles.

If you ask these questions of the entire class, students will learn other lessons. They will see that everyone gets stuck. They'll learn some strategies they can use to get unstuck. And, most importantly, they'll see that you value and reinforce the importance of making an effort.

Source: Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Counseling Skills for Teachers*, ISBN: 9781-4129-4922-4 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

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Motivating Students

Volunteer readers can turn kids on to books



Sending high school students into elementary school classrooms to read is a great strategy for motivating young readers. Here's how students at Loretto High School, Loretto, Tennessee, reach out.

Once a week, high school readers visit kindergarten through second-grade classrooms. They read books nominated for the Volunteer State Book Award. Readers can be as flamboyant as they wish—some dress in character. Books are purchased with grant money and are then donated to the high school library for its special children's section.

After reading the books, the high school students always talk with the younger children. They share their love of reading and other interests.

What do you need to start a reading program like this?

- **Recruit high school students** who are willing to read to young children.
- **Work with a librarian** to select appealing children's literature. Each reader should have one book to read. Choose books published within the last year or two to increase the likelihood that students will not be familiar with them.
- **Ask a high school teacher** to coach the readers in some performance techniques.
- **Schedule a regular time** for the students to visit and read.

Source: "Volunteer State Readers Program," National Youth Summit Youth Leadership Guide, www.ncfy.com/publications/guide/vsrp.htm.

Resources



Even the best teachers need new ways to reach an increasingly diverse student population. Robert Cole's *Educating Everybody's Children* is based on the premise, "We know what works." It includes research-based strategies to meet a wide range of needs. Some are content-specific. Others are more general (activate prior learning). All can help teachers "do the possible," in Cole's words. (ISBN: 9781-4166-0674-1, Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org/books.)



Looking for a way to involve parents in reinforcing math skills? The At Home With Math website includes 10 fun activities for parents and children from ages five to 11. Families can use items they will find around their homes—junk mail, coupons, clocks—to practice math skills. All activities include variations for older or younger children. Send home one activity each week for families to enjoy. Check out the website at http://athomewithmath.terc.edu/math_kits.html.



Tell us what you think!

We'd love to hear your ideas on how we might make your *Better Teaching* newsletter even better at helping you improve student achievement.

Which topics would you like to see covered more/less? Are there issues we are not addressing now that you would like to see included?

Other suggestions? We'd like to hear from you. Complete the brief survey online at www.teacher-institute.com/survey, or send your ideas to *The Teacher Institute, Editorial Dept., P.O. Box 397, Fairfax Station, VA 22039*, 1-800-216-3667 (fax), or email betterteaching@teacher-institute.com.

Classroom Management

A secret ballot helps to review the day



Asking students to review what they've learned at the end of the day is a good way to reinforce learning. Here's a fun way to spice up that activity:

1. **Give each student** a small strip of paper marked Secret Ballot. Near the end of the day, have them write one thing they remember learning on the strip of paper. When they have finished, have them deposit the "ballot" in a "ballot box" at the front of the room.
2. **Draw out a ballot or two.** Read what is written on the ballot. Ask how many other children remembered that. Draw two or three more (depending on how much time you have before the end of the day).

You can also create a specific writing prompt. "Write something Mr. Jones said today." "What is something our guest told us today?"

You may find that you learn something from the secret ballots. Suppose you read a favorite story during Read-Aloud time. You got so excited about it that you read three chapters instead of one.

The ballots can act like theater reviews. "Ms. Smith read a really long story," one may say. That's a sign that the next time you read that book, you'd better break it into shorter chunks.

Source: Donna Whyte, *Morning Meeting, Afternoon Wrap-Up*, ISBN: 9781-8845-4865-9 (Crystal Springs Books, a division of SDE, 1-800-321-0401, www.crystalsprings.com).

Focus : Study Skills

Learning to Remember

Help students make connections



To help students remember information, teach them to use, apply and associate what they are trying to remember.

Here are some suggestions:

- **Illustrate.** If students need to learn several dates, make sure they know the importance of what happened on those dates. Showing pictures of events will reinforce them for visual learners.
- **Play.** Memory games such as “Concentration” transform the task from drudgery to fun. Adding gentle competition may also make learning the information more important—and interesting!
- **Visualize.** Sometimes a picture is not available. Teach students to make pictures in their heads. For example, to learn $4 \times 4 = 16$, some students picture a truck (4 by 4)

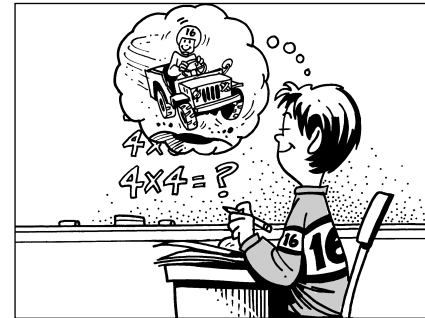


Illustration by Bob George

with a driver who is wearing a shirt with the number 16 on it. Always ask students, “when you think of this, what picture can you make in your head?” It doesn’t matter how silly the picture is—as long as it works.

Source: Betty K. Garner, *Getting to Got It! Helping Struggling Students Learn How to Learn*, ISBN: 1-4166-0608-4 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

Self-Assessment

Highlight study skills with wrong test answers

a. _____ Students don’t always know why they got something wrong on a test. Developing a self-assessment activity can be one way to highlight how their study skills did—or didn’t—work.

When you hand back a test, tell students you will allow them to raise their grades by redoing a problem they missed. Have students rework that problem, showing their work.

Now ask them to think about why they got the answer wrong the first time.

Responses could include:

- **I didn’t understand** the question.
- **I made a careless error.**
- **I skipped a step.**
- **I studied this but I forgot** how to do it.
- **I didn’t study** before this test.
- **I ran out of time** and rushed through it.
- **I guessed.**

Finally, have students write why they think they have the correct answer now. As your students work carefully through the questions they missed, they will see the mistakes they are most likely to make and learn how to correct their errors *before* they turn in a test paper.

Source: Barbara R. Blackburn, *Classroom Instruction from A to Z*, ISBN: 9781-5966-7038-9 (Eye on Education Press, 1-888-299-5350, www.eyoneducation.com).

Homework

Eliminate common assignment concerns



“I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do.” “I didn’t understand the assignment.” Whether you’re a new teacher or a veteran, chances are you’ve heard this before.

To give clear assignments:

- **Break up large assignments** into chunks and assign a specific due date to each chunk.
- **Use homework planners.** Check them at the end of each day.
- **Make sure each student** has at least one study buddy to call or email about assignments.
- **Post assignments** on a web-based classroom assignment program.

- **Consider *when* you assign** work. The end of class, when students are rushing toward the door, is not a good time for assignments. Have them posted as students walk in. Make copying down assignments their first task.
- **Present assignments** visually on a white board or overhead.
- **Discuss assignments verbally.** Ask students who have questions to raise their hands or see you after class.

Source: Sydney S. Zentall and Sam Goldstein, *Seven Steps to Homework Success*, ISBN: 1-886941-22-X (Specialty Press, Inc., 1-800-233-9273, www.addwarehouse.com).