

# Better Teaching<sup>®</sup>

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

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Bringing Lessons to Life

### Teach history, traditions of the flag



In 1949, President Harry S. Truman designated a day to honor the flag of the United States. Flag Day has been observed on June 14<sup>th</sup> ever since. As you teach your students the fascinating history and traditions of the flag, focus on:

- **Symbolism.** Symbolism is a key literary device for your students to learn. Ask them to write or draw what they think of when they see the flag. Explore the symbols within the flag, too—the 13 stripes, the 50 stars, and the red, white and blue colors. Also talk about the symbols in the flags of our neighbors to the north and south.
- **The flag in action.** Take an in-school field trip to watch your school flag being raised or lowered. Back in the classroom, have a discussion of what students observed.
- **Flag etiquette.** Discuss questions such as: What is the proper way to display the flag? Can the flag be

flown at night? Should the flag ever be flown upside down? What is the correct way to fold the flag?

As hands-on activities, students can:

- **Create a time line** of important events and people in the history of the U.S. flag. Show how new states changed the design of the flag.
- **Design a class flag.** Have students work in groups to create a flag design that symbolizes their class. Make sure they explain why they picked various symbols. For example, they might use the color green to represent their commitment to taking care of the earth.

Have students create rules for the class flag. Each group can establish one or two points of etiquette. Then together, write a “Code for the Flag of Room 4A.” Be sure to include a glossary.

**Source:** EDSITEment, “Stars and Stripes Forever: Flag Facts for Flag Day,” National Endowment for the Humanities, [http://edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=338](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=338).

Building Reading Skills

### ‘Summer slide’ is not a playground activity



For too many students, a learning slide occurs when they go through the summer without reading. Here are some fun ways to prevent the “summer slide”—and involve the whole family:

- **Create a “passport to reading.”** Give each student a “passport”—a book with plenty of blank pages—and a map of the world. Over the summer, challenge your students to look for books set in countries around the world. Each time they finish a book, they can enter the name of the book and the country it represents. Each student can then have a parent “stamp” the passports with the date and a sticker.
- **Make reading a game.** Give each student a set of tickets labeled “I caught you reading!” Then each time they find a family member reading, they put a ticket for that person into a bowl. At the end of the week, the family could draw a ticket from the bowl and give one reader a small prize.
- **Create a graffiti wall.** Send home large pieces of poster paper that students have decorated to look like a brick wall. Over the summer, encourage students to draw pictures and write recommendations about the best books they read. In the fall, they can bring the poster papers back and create an enormous book graffiti wall in the school.

**Source:** “Tips for Back to School Reading and Beyond,” Reading is Fundamental, [www.rif.org/parents/tips/tip.msp?View=13](http://www.rif.org/parents/tips/tip.msp?View=13).

Teaching Tips

## Manage your end-of-year grading



Report card time at the end of a school year nearly always means hours of extra work for any teacher. Here are some ideas for successfully completing report cards while balancing other end-of-year responsibilities:

- **Think twice** before assigning a project that will be due at the end of the school year. Unless they are absolutely necessary, projects due the last week or two of school often result in students' frustration rather than their best work. And it's one more thing for you to deal with.
- **Get grades in early.** Just because you're not grading, does not mean students aren't learning. Assign meaningful work in the last few days of school but end graded work, if possible, about a week before.
- **Set aside time every day** to work on grades. As with all tasks, doing this in chunks may keep you from pulling your hair out the night before report cards are due.

**Source:** Stella Erbes, *What Teachers Should Know, But Textbooks Don't Show*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-5068-8 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Surviving the First Year: Part Two of a Three-Part Series

## Reflect on your first year of teaching



The conclusion of your first year as a teacher carries with it those feelings you could never adequately describe to someone who hasn't "been there." The end of your first educational journey with a group of students you will never forget is a time for congratulations—and for reflection and planning.

Here are some points to consider:

- **Connect with your students.** You will have many groups of students over a long and fulfilling teaching career. But you will never forget your first class. Ask the students to write you a note telling you something they learned or particularly enjoyed this year. Place these in a scrapbook—you'll find yourself looking them over after a bad day. Take a few moments to write a personal note to each of your students, as well.

- **Make notes.** If you've been keeping a journal all year long, you will be glad to have it next year. If not, make it a point this month to note things you're doing that are *working well*: Students really enjoyed learning on that last project. Or things that are *not working well*: Teaching math toward the end of the day is not optimal.
- **Create visuals.** Take photos of class projects, displays and anything else you might want to try again next year. You may think you'll remember just how you set them up. But chances are, come next August or September, you'll be referring to those photos.

**Source:** Renee Rosenblum-Lowden with Felicia Lowden Kimmel, *You Have to Go to School ... You're the Teacher!* ISBN: 978-1-4129-5122-7 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Mathematics

## Make sure students know math vocabulary



Students can't understand math concepts if they don't know the vocabulary.

Before teaching a new math unit, have students assess their knowledge of the vocabulary they will need to know.

Here's how:

- **Look through a new math unit** before you begin to teach it and identify essential vocabulary words. For a unit on fractions, for example, the list might include: *fraction, numerator, denominator, common denominator, proper fraction, improper fraction* and *mixed numbers*.
- **Have your students examine** the list, then assign a rating of 1 to 4 to each word as follows:

- 1 = **I've never heard** this term.
- 2 = **I have seen or heard** this term, but I'm not sure what it means.
- 3 = **I think I know** what this term means.
- 4 = **I know this term** and can explain what it means.

- **Repeat this activity** over the course of the unit. Do it again after you complete the unit. Students will quickly see their progress in understanding the content. You can also use their knowledge of the vocabulary as a way of assessing whether students have truly mastered the information in the unit.

**Source:** Harvey F. Silver, *Math Tools, Grades 3–12: 64 Ways to Differentiate Instruction*, ISBN: 9781-4129-5782-3 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

## Establishing Routines

### Prepare now for a good start in the fall



Taking time at the end of the school year can help you get off to a better start in the fall. Here are four things to do as you end the school year:

1. **Create a “first week” box.** Think now about everything you’ll want for the first week of school—nametags, bulletin board supplies, worksheets for math or reading. Put all the items in a box so you can find them easily next fall.
2. **Consider changes.** While things are fresh in your mind, write down the changes you want to make if you’re teaching the same units next year. From the guest speaker you learned about *after* you’d taught the unit on the pilgrims to the class activity that

led to chaos in the classroom, you’ll be glad you don’t have to rely on your memory.

3. **Go electronic.** Think about what you can computerize. Computers can certainly save time—but learning a new computer program during the school year can also be stressful. Do you want to use a computerized grade book next year? Use email to communicate with parents? Spend time mastering the program this summer.
4. **Clean out.** Do you have unused worksheets? Bundle them up and send them home with students. They’re great for practice on basic skills—and you’ll have less to unpack next fall!

## Connecting With Students

### Help new students adapt and feel welcome



Students who move frequently often lag behind. Sometimes, a move may cause them to miss some important content. Or students may be reluctant to participate in a new classroom where they don’t know anyone.

Academic problems faced by children who move frequently are real, according to researchers. But now a new study suggests that teachers can help students overcome them.

Researchers followed 1,000 elementary students for four years. They found that while moving can lead to academic problems, teachers played a big role in helping children overcome these problems.

Over the summer break, think about how you might implement a classroom plan to help students who

move into your school. Here are some things you might do:

- **Address deficits.** Test students promptly. Figure out where their academic backgrounds may be lacking. Then help the students address those deficits.
- **Make new students feel welcome** in your class. You might set up a bulletin board to highlight new students. Or feature new students in a class newsletter.
- **Help new students make friends.** The research showed that students who were accepted by their peers were more likely to do well academically and also to have better attitudes toward school.

**Source:** “Supportive Teachers, Peers Can Ease Negative Effects of Frequent Moves in Elementary School,” Science Daily, [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/11/081114080920.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/11/081114080920.htm).

## Resources



Teaching ELL students to read can be a challenge. Sylvia Linan-Thompson and Sharon Vaughn’s *Research-Based Methods of Reading Instruction for English Language Learners: Grades K–4* can help. Topics include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and comprehension. You’ll find step-by-step activities and lesson plans. In-depth explanations of research show not only what to do, but why it works. (ISBN: 9781-4166-0577-5, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org).)



Looking for the most up-to-date listing of books and online resources to use in your classroom? Check out PBS Teachers ([www.pbs.org/teachers/books/links](http://www.pbs.org/teachers/books/links)) for updates in all curricular areas. Selections are recommended by teachers and students, and are available across grade levels and subject matters.



Add Karen Hawthorne’s *Bulletin Boards and 3-D Showcases That Capture Them with Pizzazz!* to your summer reading list. It includes page after page of attention-getting and appealing bulletin boards and showcases. You’ll find everything from materials lists to step-by-step instructions. (ISBN: 1-563-08695-6, Teacher Ideas Press, a division of Libraries Unlimited, 1-800-237-6124, [www.lu.com](http://www.lu.com).)

## 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 : At-Risk Students

### Giving Feedback

## Tailor your feedback for students who struggle



Giving students feedback often involves comparing their present level of work with a mastery of the concept. But for many students at risk, mastery, at the moment, is not a reachable goal. So you'll have to take a different approach with your feedback. For example:

- **Point out successful use** of a strategy. Be explicit. "You went back and read the passage a second time. We have talked about how re-reading might help, and it did. You have more correct answers on the comprehension questions this time."
- **Refer to improvement**, even if there is still a long way to go. "I see that you used three adjectives—words that describe nouns—in your writing today. This is good progress from last week. Next, let's talk about ways you can use adverbs."
- **Remember past successes** to get back on track. "I saw you checking the dictionary yesterday, and every word in your assignment was spelled correctly! Today, I see some errors. Let's make checking the dictionary a daily habit."

**Source:** Susan M. Brookhart, *How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students*, ISBN: 978-1-4166-0736-6 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

### Positive Thinking

## Your words can convey confidence



At-risk students need to know that someone thinks they can be successful. Your words can help develop the attitudes and behaviors these students need to succeed.

Choose your words carefully. The words you use (and your tone of voice) should convey your belief that your students want to be successful—and know how to do that.

"Show me how you will follow the rules for walking in the hallway," you say in a calm, quiet voice. But what students hear is, "I know you want to follow the rules, and I know you can control your behavior."

Similarly, you can convey confidence in students' ability to succeed in class. "Look at the chart to remind yourselves of the best way to do a science experiment." Your



Illustration by Bob George

students understand that you have confidence in their ability to act independently and to be successful.

You'll find that the more you do this, the more students will, in fact, see themselves as respectful listeners and successful learners.

**Source:** Paula Denton, "The Power of Our Words," *Educational Leadership*, September 2008 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

### Setting High Expectations

## At-risk students *can* meet high standards



There is no question that students at risk require distinct treatment in many areas. In the midst of making sure their needs are met, the idea of setting high standards can get lost and overridden. But being lax lets everyone down.

Here are some suggestions:

- **Enforce the dress code.** Not all students can afford the latest fashions, but *all* students *can* observe the three C's—clean, covered and civil (no obscene messages on clothing). Settling for less from all students means settling for disrespect.

- **Insist on proper speech.** All students can reply politely, without slang and in complete sentences—unless a student is an English language learner or has serious disabilities.
- **Encourage thinking skills.** You may be so pleased to get *any* answer from a student that you just accept it and move on. Don't. Ask for an example. Give the student prompts to think about the question. Ask if the topic is related to a personal experience.

**Source:** Brian M. Pete and Robin J. Fogerty, *Close the Achievement Gap*, ISBN: 0-9747416-5-5 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).