

Better Teaching[®]

Classroom Ideas to Improve Student Achievement

Elementary
EDITION

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Bringing Lessons to Life

Build strong bodies, strong minds



Students may become more interested in eating healthy foods if they know how these foods benefit them—and how junk foods hurt them. National Nutrition Month is the perfect time for you to teach this lesson. Here are some ideas:

- **Know the food groups.** Do your students know that nuts, seeds and beans can be protein substitutes for meats? Do they know how much milk (or other high-calcium food) a child their age should have each day? Consider devoting one wall of your classroom to this information. Have students make “food group facts” posters to fill the wall.
- **Challenge picky eaters.** Have students name some foods they do not like. Then assign them to research foods they *do* like that are just as healthy and report to the class why. Ask students to get the whole family involved in this project.

- **Plan a perfect menu.** Divide the class into groups of five. Put each group member in charge of a food group. (Go to www.MyPyramid.gov for age-level guidance.) Have each group plan a menu for a day to include breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner and bedtime snack. Each food group representative is responsible for contributing food from that food group.

Discuss the menus as a class. Do they include enough servings from each food group?

- **Meet a new fruit or vegetable.** Apples and bananas are great, but so are kumquats, kiwis and pomegranates. Assign each student to present a lesser-known fruit or vegetable to the class.

Source: American Dietetic Association, “National Nutrition Month 2008: Nutrition: It’s a Matter of Fact: Teacher’s Guide,” www.lets-go.org/resources/documents/B5T5-3NationalNutritionMonth.pdf.

Setting High Expectations

Tell students to think about ‘two pluses and a wish’ each week



Involve your students in setting high expectations for their own work. Each week, as you prepare to send home your weekly take-home folders, ask students to write “two pluses and a wish.” Very young children can dictate their two pluses and a wish to you, a para-educator or a parent volunteer.

The two pluses are two things they think they have done well. (“I used friendly words when I disagreed with Marco.”) The wish is something they hope they can do better during the coming week. (“I want to score 100 percent on my spelling test.”)

You can also add your own two pluses and a wish about each student’s work. Finally, invite parents to look through the folders and add their two pluses and a wish, too.

Keep these forms in the students’ folders. Review them regularly with students so they can see how they are progressing. Then, as students meet their wish goals, help them celebrate their successes—and set new, higher goals.

As parents and children continually look for pluses and a wish, they will be more aware of what their children are learning week by week. They will also be partners with you in setting high expectations for their child.

Source: Carol Davis and Alice Yang, “Point of Contact,” *Virginia Journal of Education*, November 2008 (Virginia Education Association, 1-800-552-9554, www.veanea.org).

Building Writing Skills

Help your students jump-start poems



Have you ever assigned your class to write a poem? You may have received some enthusiastic smiles. But you probably saw just as many blank stares and heard a few groans, as well. Many students simply don't know where to begin.

Give each student a fill-in-the-blank template. This format gives them a reassuring start, and you will often find the finished products to be compelling.

Here is a basic example. This poem is called "I am":

I am _____.

I feel _____.

I wonder _____.

I imagine _____.

I worry when _____.

I am (last line should be the same as the first line.) _____.

You may want to complete one yourself first and pass it out to the students as an example. Strongly encourage them to fill in the blanks with more than just one word to complete the sentences.

Depending on your students' levels and abilities, you can add 10 or more lines to the poem.

Source: S. Arthur Kelly, *Writing with Families*, ISBN: 0-92985-66-5 (Maupin House, 1-800-524-0634, www.maupinhouse.com).

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

Challenge students to inspire their peers to learn



After you teach a concept to the whole class, use group challenges as one way to help students on the road to mastery.

Here's a sample plan:

- 1. Divide students** into small groups of three or four.
- 2. Give students a challenge.** For example: "Find ways to help everyone in your group learn the definitions for the new social studies unit."
- 3. Offer students ideas** and, if necessary, materials to carry out ideas. For example: "Make flash cards with words and pictures of the definitions. Quiz each other and award one point to group members for correct answers—see who can rack up the most points. Challenge each other to find words in your textbook or notes—take turns reading the words and definitions aloud."
- 4. Encourage students** to be creative. The first time you create groups for

group challenges, students will probably use one or more ideas supplied by you. But after the second or third time, you should see them coming up with their own ideas for learning material—writing stories, drawing cartoons, making up songs, poems or raps.

- 5. Monitor group progress.** At times, a group may not work well. You may have to step in, give specific ideas or even assign members to other groups. On the other hand, some groups will latch onto an idea and run with it. You will be able to see the students' enthusiasm and watch the learning happening. When you see a group like this, ask them to share their methods with the whole class.

Source: Merrill Harmin with Melanie Toth, *Inspiring Active Learning*, ISBN: 1-4166-0155-4 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

Teaching Tips

Know when students can work on their own



There comes a time when a mother bird pushes her fledglings out of the nest. The same should be true for teachers. You need to look for the time that students can start working on their own.

This is particularly true for students with disabilities. The tendency may be to continue to offer students help when, in fact, they are capable of doing the work on their own.

To motivate students to work independently:

- **Develop a way** for your students to signal for help that does not involve raising their hands. (After all, when students wave their hands in the air, they can't keep working.)

- **Have students place** a colored card, for example, on the corner of their desks to signal that they need help.
- **Allow these students to wait** an extra minute or two before you rush to respond.
- **Ask students to tell you** what they *do* know when you respond. Often, just by talking about what they know, students can figure out for themselves where the answer lies.

Students will progress at different rates. But by continually pushing them, you will help all students learn to work on their own.

Source: William N. Bender, *Differentiating Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities*, ISBN: 0-761-94517-2 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Encouraging Participation

Real-world questions involve all students



The second graders in Billie Hetrick's class at Newsome Park Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia, were worried about their friend. What caused her cystic fibrosis? Is there a cure?

So they started doing their own research. They interviewed representatives of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. They searched on the Internet. They created thinking maps and then wrote reports. Finally, they took action—raising over \$1200 through a Math Challenge and a walkathon.

Project-based learning such as this gives students the chance to ask—and answer—big questions. Students make decisions about how to find answers. They work together on their research and collaborate later on presentations to share what they know.

The keys to project-based learning are:

- **Curricular content.** All projects are tied to state standards and all require students to demonstrate content learning.
- **Multimedia emphasis.** Students use a variety of technologies as they plan, develop and present projects.
- **Student direction.** Students are in charge of their learning.
- **Collaboration.** Students work with one another, with their teachers and with the community.
- **A real-world connection.** The mother of the student with cystic fibrosis says, "It has given the children a better understanding of what my daughter has to go through on a daily basis."

Source: Diane Curtis, "More Fun Than a Barrel of Worms," *EduTopia Magazine*, www.edutopia.org/more-fun-barrel-worms.

Resources



Print out free graphic organizers from Houghton Mifflin English. You'll find a clock organizer to help students place details in chronological order, a K-W-L chart, a Tree chart and a Problem-Solution chart. There's even an ice cream cone to help students organize their writing before they begin. Visit www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer.



Running out of ideas for your literacy center? Kindergarten teacher Kathleen Adair describes 22 different literacy centers she uses in her classroom. Some are traditional—children practice writing on a chalkboard. Others are unusual—in a center called Writing the Room, students use paper on a clipboard and copy the print in the classroom. When your own creativity is starting to run dry, check out ideas at www.cobb.k12.ga.us/~frey/kahome/kalitcenters.html#bkboxes.



If you have lost teaching time to an in-class tantrum, check out Ronald Mah's *The One-Minute Temper Tantrum Solution*. He examines the factors that can trigger these behaviors and also provides interventions for managing tantrums. You'll find suggestions for determining when tantrums may be related to disabilities. (ISBN: 9781-4129-5721-2, Corwin Press, a Sage Publications Company, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com.)

Testing Tips

Teach students to look at tests three times



Students sometimes earn low scores on tests for avoidable reasons: They spend too much time on one question. Or they write their answers on the wrong part of the answer sheet.

Teach students to go through any big test three times:

1. **The first time** through the test they should answer any questions they know immediately. This is not the time to devote a great deal of time to one question. They should mark questions they don't know so they can return to them.
2. **The second time** through they can focus on remaining questions. Have them *read the directions*, then carefully read the questions

they don't know. Underline key words, or (even better) try to restate the question in their own words. Look for clues in the question that may help them. If they are truly stuck on a question, teach students to move on.

3. **The third time** through students should start by checking the clock. They should make one final try at answering questions they have left blank. Then they should spot-check to make sure the answer to Question #2 is in the correct place on the answer sheet.

Source: Rona F. Flippo, *Preparing Students for Testing and Doing Better in School*, ISBN: 9781-4129-5374-0 (Corwin Press, a Sage Publications Company, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.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/.

Full credit will be given with each article published. Materials sent cannot be returned.

Focus : Discipline

Managing Behavior

Break behavior tasks into steps

Responding to Misbehavior

Craft a response to misbehavior



According to one group of teachers, who are also authors and discipline experts, student misbehavior almost always fits into one of four categories:

1. **They honestly don't know** they are misbehaving. Example: A student's fidgeting is so severe it is annoying to you and others.
2. **They are trying to divert** attention from low academic abilities, either real or perceived. Example: A student says he doesn't need to study because the chapter is "stupid."
3. **They are trying to impress** their peers. Example: You correct a student in front of his friends, and he responds by talking back to you.
4. **They simply want attention.** Example: A student continues to purposefully interrupt instruction.

Now that you see the reasons, here are possible responses:

1. **Allow the student** to fidget or pace for a brief time in the back of the room.
2. **Offer the student** extra help after school—privately.
3. **Speak to the student** after class, unless misbehavior is severe.
4. **Involve the student** in instruction—"Come up and help me explain this lesson."

Source: Brian D. Mandler et al., *Strategies for Successful Classroom Management*, ISBN: 1-4129-3784-9 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

a. — When you're teaching a new math skill, you help students break the skill into shorter, more manageable steps. The same technique can work when you are introducing a new behavior.

Suppose you are trying to get students to clean their desks after working on a messy art project. When students won't respond to "Clean your desks," give them step-by-step directions, instead.

For example:

1. **Put the crayons** back in the box. Put the box in your desk.
2. **Place the scissors** in the tray near the window.
3. **Put your completed projects** in the folder on Mrs. Jones' desk.
4. **Return whole pieces** of unused paper to the stack by the sink.



Illustration by Bob George

5. **Dampen a paper towel** very lightly while you are at the sink. Use it to wipe your desks.

Create a poster listing each of the steps. Gradually, your students will learn exactly what you mean when you say, "Clean your desks."

Source: Rick Smith and Mary Lambert, "Assuming the Best," *Educational Leadership*, September 2008 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

Discipline

Know how to set and use consequences



No one enjoys having to impose consequences. Still, they are sometimes necessary. And they are also effective—if administered properly. Here's what research shows:

- **Avoid behavior problems** by being explicit about classroom rules. Give frequent reminders about expectations.
- **Be firm, fair and consistent.** "Lowering the boom" occasionally is not the way to go. Instead, give mild consequences on a consistent basis.
- **Act immediately.** Consequences must follow the misbehavior as

closely as possible. Otherwise, students can lose the link between the behavior and the consequence.

- **Show respect.** This can be hard to do when students are acting up, but it is precisely *when* you must do it. Humiliating, insulting or labeling a student can cause emotional harm.
- **Give plenty of positive** attention, praise or even privileges when a student is behaving well.

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