

# Better Teaching<sup>®</sup>

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Elementary  
EDITION

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Making Success Our Business



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Bringing Lessons to Life

## Show class learning truly can be fun



So it's June. And there's no use pretending your students don't have one eye on the door (or out the window)! But the other eye can still have a twinkle in it, thanks to the fun and educational activities you can try—now that most standardized testing and other obligations are behind you.

To keep them engaged, have students:

- **Make a TV commercial.** Depending on the ages of your students, this activity can incorporate writing, oral language and even math.

Encourage students to sell a product (such as a new game) that focuses on aiding the environment or solving a social problem.

Give students a budget and the cost for airing their commercial. How often can they afford to air it?

Videotape your students as they pitch their commercial.

- **Create a "wax museum."** Even the youngest students can do this. Have

each student choose a famous person, dress up as that person and speak a few lines about the person's life. You can provide the lines for younger students. Have older students research someone the class has studied and write their own lines. Stress that costumes be kept simple—this is not the time to ask parents to sew or buy something.

- **Be the teacher.** Give each student a block of time to teach you and the class—a math lesson, how to speak another language, how to play the recorder, etc. Send home a note about the project at least a week in advance. Stress that this activity should be simple and fun.

**Sources:** Gary Hopkins, "Wind Up Learning as the Year Winds Down: Activities for the Last Days of School," Education World, [www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/lesson/lesson184.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson/lesson184.shtml).

Find additional sources at [www.teacher-institute.com/bt/resources/bte-jun07sources.pdf](http://www.teacher-institute.com/bt/resources/bte-jun07sources.pdf)

Technology

## Consider the pros & cons of online versus traditional materials



"No more pencils, no more books," is a reality in a growing number of classrooms. Chances are you will encounter it sometime in your career—at least one class where you and your students replace paper, pencils and books with complete reliance on laptops.

Because it represents wholesale change in the way students learn, the trend is still slow. But it's steady—across the country, pockets of school districts are choosing online materials instead of books for their classrooms.

So is this a good change? Should you take steps in this direction? Consider the pros and cons.

Pros:

- **Students enjoy working** with computers and some students have better attention spans when using them.
- **Online resources** are often up-to-the-minute and easy to update. No more outdated textbooks.
- **Students are learning skills** they can carry to higher education and the workforce.

Cons:

- **Teachers need training** to switch to technology-based learning.
- **Backup materials** have to be used if the system crashes.
- **Initial expense** to supply laptops to students is high.

**Sources:** Kathy A. Goolsby, "Schools toss aside texts for e-books," The Dallas Morning News, [www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/education/stories/110406dnmetebooks.3255a88.html](http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/education/stories/110406dnmetebooks.3255a88.html).

**IN THIS ISSUE:** Writing workshops spark creative writing, page 2 • Work together to keep students learning, page 3 • Teach students 'book basics,' page 4

## Encouraging Participation

### Make students active learners



Participation is more than just calling on students, then waiting as they struggle to come up with an answer. The goal of participation is to increase students' chances for successful learning. The key is *active* participation.

Students are likely to learn better when activities keep them alert. Here are some to try:

- **Experiments.**
- **Role-playing.**
- **Puzzles.**
- **Group projects.**

If these activities don't fit into your lesson plans, try to:

- **Vary your teaching style.** Use a short activity that relates to the topic before beginning your lecture. Show a film clip or play a chapter from an audio book.
- **Make the lesson relevant** to your students' lives.
- **Ask questions** that require students to use thinking skills.
- **Provide feedback.** Give approving nods, or write notes on written assignments whenever possible, so students know that they're making progress.

**Source:** Raymond J. Wlodkowski and Judith H. Jaynes, *Eager to Learn: Helping Children Become Motivated and Love Learning*, ISBN: 1-55542-206-3 (Jossey-Bass, 1-800-956-7739, www.josseybass.com).

## Understanding Poverty: Part Two of a Three-Part Series

### Understand the reasons behind behavior



Summer is a time when you can reflect on the past year, and make plans for the school year that begins in three short months (or fewer!). Resolve to begin the next school year with a greater understanding of why some students in poverty may behave as they do. Come to school prepared to deal with and intervene with certain behaviors.

Here's a short guide:

- **If your student laughs at you,** consider this may be a way to preserve dignity. Do not punish the student for laughing. Instead, supply several choices of appropriate behaviors.
- **If your student argues,** consider that this may not be personally directed at you, but is part of a learned behavior of railing against authority. Instead of arguing back, calmly announce that you will discuss it after class. Then, help the student think of other ways to handle the situation.
- **If your student uses inappropriate language,** consider that the student

may be immune to the effect such language has on many people. Instead of becoming angry, brainstorm with the student about other, more appropriate ways to communicate wants and needs.

- **If your student fights,** consider this may have been learned as a survival skill. Instead of lecturing, be clear and firm. Fighting is not allowed in school—ever. The consequences for fighting are severe. Together, talk about some alternatives to fighting.
- **If your student has trouble** following directions, consider that the student may have little or no experience with this process. Help by providing both oral and written instructions (on the board, on paper), prompting for the next step after one step has been completed, or providing directions in picture form.

**Source:** Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D., *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, ISBN: 1-929229-48-8 (aha! Process, Inc., 1-800-424-9484, www.ahaprocess.com).

## Writing

### Writing workshops spark creative thinking



Children are natural storytellers. They enjoy making up silly stories and sharing them with others. Have your students bring that natural enthusiasm for spinning yarns into the classroom. Hold a writing workshop where students brainstorm, write and tell their tales to the class.

Have your students:

1. **Select topics.** If a student is really stuck and can't come up with a topic, suggest changing the ending of a story the student already knows. Perhaps the student can add a few new characters.
2. **Brainstorm.** Encourage students to get their ideas on paper. Have them pair up and use each other as "sounding boards" for ideas. Go to each student and ask questions to bolster creative thinking.
3. **Write their stories.** Encourage students to illustrate them, too.
4. **Read stories aloud.** Have students pick numbers out of a hat or go in alphabetical order.
5. **Give feedback.** A simple round of genuine, enthusiastic applause works like a charm, but consider a short Q&A time at the end of each reading.

## Connecting With Parents

### Work together to keep students learning



Soon enough, your students will be cleaning out their desks in anticipation of a summer of fun and freedom.

But will that fun include learning and reading? It should, or they may fall behind in what is commonly referred to as the “summer slide.”

Even though your students will no longer be in a classroom setting, their parents can foster learning at home throughout the summer months.

To get them started, consider what type of information to give parents to keep their children learning. Think about ways to communicate the information.

For example:

- **Organize an end-of-year** conference with parents to talk about summer learning ideas.

- **Create a newsletter.** Include ideas on local field trips they can take with their children as well as alternatives to TV.
- **Direct them** to your school or class website where you can post learning ideas.
- **Create a summer reading list.**
- **List the skills** that students should work on for next year.
- **Assign an optional project** such as reading a certain number of books or cracking a challenging math problem.

Give parents your email address so they can contact you with any questions or let you know how students are doing with their projects.

**Source:** “Top 10 Ways to Help Parents Prevent Summer Brain Freeze!” Buddy<sup>2</sup>, [www.buddyproject.org/jfy/teachers/articles/summer.asp](http://www.buddyproject.org/jfy/teachers/articles/summer.asp).

## Resources



Have you ever wished that there were a guide to working with parents? A new book by Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson and Don Davies lays it all out for you. *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* is a research-based guide for teachers, parents and school leaders that provides tips on how to foster a meaningful partnership between families and schools.

The book features a lengthy resource section chock full of tips, checklists and surveys. These will help you look at parent involvement in your school today, how you want it to look and how to get there. It’s available at [www.parent-institute.com/educator](http://www.parent-institute.com/educator).



From closing the achievement gap to implementing fine arts programs, the NEA (National Education Association) Foundation awards hundreds of grants every year to educators who want to improve the quality of their students’ education. And you don’t need to be a member to apply—any educator practicing in a public school is eligible. Find information on types of grants, eligibility, deadlines and how to apply at [www.neafoundation.org/grants.htm](http://www.neafoundation.org/grants.htm).

## Surviving the First Year

### Take time to reflect & prepare for next year



It’s finally here—the end of your first year of teaching. And now it’s time to reflect. Feel free to take a week or two to “decompress” first!

Consider creating an end-of-year evaluation for yourself. Ask yourself these questions:

- **Which events** or activities were successful?
- **Which activities** were not successful? Why not?
- **What lessons** have I learned from my students?
- **What lessons** have I learned from my co-workers?
- **Which part(s)** of my classroom management style should I work on next year?

Then get a jump start on next year over the summer. For example, you may want to:

- **Create a better schedule** for yourself so that you don’t have to spend as much time grading papers at home in the evenings and on the weekend.
- **Tweak activity ideas** that have potential.
- **Keep in touch** with your fellow teachers. Share ideas.

Jot down a list of things you can do this summer that may help you get ready for next year. Now that you’ve finished your first full year of teaching, it will be easier to prepare for the coming school year.

Of course, make sure you take time for some much needed rest and relaxation, too!

**Source:** Ellen Moir, “Phases of First-Year Teaching,” The New Teacher Center, [www.newteachercenter.org/article2.php](http://www.newteachercenter.org/article2.php).

## 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](http://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](mailto:betterteaching@teacher-institute.com).*

## Focus n: Reading

Reading Strategies

### Increase fluency, reading enjoyment

Building Reading Skills

#### Teach students 'book basics'



One of the most important—and often overlooked—

parts of learning to read is learning the very basic features of a book. Your students can't learn to read a book properly if they hold it upside down with the cover facing them!

As you prepare your students for a summer of reading adventure, take time to review these "book basics." Make sure they:

- **Handle books properly**—use clean hands, don't break the spines, fold down corners or write in books. Show them how to turn pages properly and put books away.
- **Understand that reading** goes from left to right and top to bottom.
- **Understand and can name** the parts of a book, such as front cover, back cover, top, bottom, spine, pages, page numbers and chapters.
- **Understand that books** have titles, authors and illustrators (and know what authors and illustrators do). Make sure they can point to each of these on the book.

As a follow-up activity, ask your students to draw their own book covers. Have them make up titles, illustrate the covers and include themselves as authors or illustrators.

**Source:** "Teaching About Books," Reading Is Fundamental, [www.rif.org/educators/articles/teaching\\_about\\_books.msp](http://www.rif.org/educators/articles/teaching_about_books.msp).



This is a great time to conduct a Reader's Theater.

Your students will be able to display the reading skills they have learned and have fun without the stress of memorizing lines.

To conduct your Reader's Theater:

1. **Pick a script.** Ask your media specialist or do an Internet search.
2. **Read the story** to your students and talk about what the characters are feeling. This will help them choose a voice (happy, sad) with which to read the characters' words.
3. **Choose roles** based on reading abilities. Highlight individual students' lines.
4. **Practice, practice, practice!** Decide how students will be positioned. Most often, students sit in a row of chairs. When it is a



Illustration by Bob George

student's turn to read, that student stands.

5. **Create simple costumes** with your students if you wish.
6. **Invite parents, colleagues** or other classes to your performance.

**Source:** Jerry L. Johns and Roberta L. Berglund, *Fluency: Strategies & Assessments*, ISBN: 0-7575-2899-6 (Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1-800-228-0810, [www.kendallhunt.com](http://www.kendallhunt.com)).

The Library

#### Evaluate class library & plan for next year



Your classroom library should be a favorite and well-used area for both you and your students. Now is a great time to evaluate the setup of your library and think of ways to make it even better and more user-friendly.

Check off these points as you evaluate your library. Do you:

- \_\_\_ **Have a wide variety** of age-appropriate literature to offer your students?
- \_\_\_ **Have some "just-for-fun"** books, too?
- \_\_\_ **Arrange books in baskets** or bins according to reading level?

\_\_\_ **Face book titles** out so students will be enticed to choose them?

\_\_\_ **Make book suggestions** based on current reading levels, but don't restrict students from trying easier or harder books?

\_\_\_ **Make it comfortable and cozy?** Students love to find pillows, stuffed animals or beanbags in the reading center.

\_\_\_ **Have a system** for allowing students to borrow and return books?

**Source:** Susan Nations and Melissa Alonso, *More Primary Literacy Centers: Making Reading and Writing Stick!* ISBN: 0-929895-76-2 (Maupin House Publishing, Inc., 1-800-524-0634, [www.maupinhouse.com](http://www.maupinhouse.com)).