

Better Teaching[®]

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Elementary
EDITION

Northeast USD 246
Making Success Our Business



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Bringing Lessons to Life

'Fall' in love with math this month



October is the perfect month for your students to "fall" in love with math. Combine a leafy fall theme with hands-on activities (no worksheets!) to perk up your students' interest in learning as much math as they can this year.

Here's how you can use leaves to teach a lesson about *symmetry*:

1. **Review symmetry.** When a symmetrical object is divided down the middle, the two halves will be perfect mirror images of each other. If you fold the object onto itself, the two halves will line up exactly. Give an example: A square is symmetrical.
2. **Have your students bring in** several different kinds of leaves, or—depending on your school grounds—collect them outside the school. Their quest is to find the most symmetrical leaf.
3. **Have students make an imprint** of each leaf. They can trace their leaves

or do crayon rubbings. Students can also press them into flattened clay or play dough.

4. **Ask students to fold** their leaf pictures exactly in half. Do the edges line up? How close do they come to lining up? Are any leaves completely symmetrical?

Save your collected leaves for the following *measurement* lesson:

1. **Weigh a plastic bag.** Pile all the leaves inside and weigh them. Subtract the weight of the bag to get the weight of the leaves. Record the weight of the leaves.
2. **Repeat this every day** as the leaves become drier in the open bag. What is happening as the leaves dry? (They should weigh less and less.) Do students know why? (The leaves are losing moisture, which has weight.)
3. **Have your students make a chart** or graph of their results.

Source: Wendy Petti, "Fall Math Idea Bank," Mathcats, www.mathcats.com/grownupcats/ideabankfallmath.html.

Building Reading Skills

Encourage beginning readers with great alphabet books



Reading alphabet books with children is a great way to give them a strong foundation for reading. They learn the names, shapes and sounds of each of the 26 letters.

Use any of the many excellent alphabet books available. To help your beginning readers:

- **Give students a new alphabet book** each month. One excellent resource is Laura Smolkin's Webbing Into Literacy website (<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/golwill/home.html>). You'll find free downloadable books with themes for each month. October, for example, features a Halloween book. At the end of the month, students can take the books home to share with parents and siblings.
- **Have children write their own** alphabet books. Take photos of children in your class doing fun things. (Alanna asks about apples. Hector hikes happily.) You may need a class mascot whose name starts with Q or X to make this work!
- **Use alphabet books to teach** content. *Eating the Alphabet* (ISBN: 0-152-01036-X, Red Wagon Books, a Division of Harcourt Brace & Co.) also teaches students the names of fruits and vegetables.

Source: Barbara A. Bradley and Jennifer Jones, "Sharing alphabet books in early childhood classrooms," *The Reading Teacher*, February 2007 (International Reading Association, 1-800-336-7323, www.reading.org).

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Establishing Routines

Write daily message to your students



Come up with a daily message, post it on the board and it can make the rest of the day run more smoothly. Now the day has a “theme.” Students know exactly where to look as soon as they enter class. They have something to think about and perhaps a task to focus on.

Here are some ideas:

- **Have a flexible schedule** for your messages. This will help when you are deciding what to write. For example, you can make Monday “Math Message Day.” Another day can be about social studies and so on. Keep the schedule flexible because when special events happen, such as field trips, you may want to write your message about those.
- **Plan your message** the night before whenever possible.
- **Write as if you were speaking** to your students. When they read your message, you want your students to “hear” your voice.

Source: Roselea S. Fisher et al., *Morning Meeting Messages K-6*, ISBN: 1-892989-17-4 (Responsive Classroom, Northeast Foundation for Children, 1-800-360-6332, www.responsiveclassroom.org).

Working Together: Part One of a Three-Part Series

Make time to help your new colleagues



Whether you’ve been teaching for one year or 40, you can never “know it all,” and the amount of information a new teacher has to take in can be completely overwhelming. Shared knowledge and advice from you, along with some understanding and encouragement, can be the difference in whether your newer colleagues remain in the profession or become another statistic.

Here are some areas where a new colleague may especially welcome your thoughtful, “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help with that”:

- **Teaching special needs students**—students who receive special education, students identified as gifted and talented or students who are English language learners. Share your experiences and help new colleagues get to know specialists who work closely with these students.
- **Helping overcome isolation**—a feeling that is so common to new teachers. It’s not always easy to be

the only adult in the room. What helps the feeling subside? Collaboration, caring and companionship from other teachers.

- **Dealing with paperwork.** Ask what a new teacher didn’t anticipate about the job, and “the amount of paperwork!” is a likely answer. Newer colleagues may need help requesting supplies, filling out forms, managing the pile of papers to be graded, corresponding with parents—or a thousand other tasks.
- **Speaking up.** It may take more than a month or two for a new colleague to understand how to best approach the principal or to contribute at a staff meeting. Some schools have a relaxed, “just chime in” environment. Others are more formal. A new teacher would probably appreciate some pointers.

Source: Betty Achinstein and Steven Z. Athanases, *Mentors in the Making: Developing New Leaders for New Teachers*, ISBN: 0-8077-4635-5 (Teachers College Press, 1-800-575-6566, www.teacherscollegepress.com).

Teaching Social Skills

Teach students to accept ‘no’ for an answer



For classrooms to run smoothly, students can’t always get their way. There are schedules to follow and rules to obey.

But some students have apparently never heard “no” until you said it to them. Here’s a way to teach your students how to accept “no” for an answer:

Brainstorm about times when someone has told them “no.” List these. What happened when they didn’t accept this answer? (The other person got angry.)

Teach your students how to behave when someone says “no”:

1. **Look at the person** who is talking. Don’t make faces.
2. **Answer by saying, “Okay”** when the person says “no.” Tell students that doesn’t mean they agree, but it *does* mean they understand.
3. **Stay calm.** Getting angry could make the situation worse. And sometimes, accepting a “no” could mean a “yes” next time.
4. **Disagree later**—if necessary. Practice in class. During the week, keep talking about this skill. Find opportunities to practice.

Source: Tom Dowd and Jeff Tierney, *Teaching Social Skills to Youth*, ISBN: 1-889-32269-5 (Boys Town Press, 1-800-282-6657, www.girlsandboystown.org).

Discipline

Consider: Is it a bribe—or is it a reward?



Many classroom discipline plans depend on rewards. But when do those rewards cross the line and become bribes?

Bribes are short-term solutions. Rewards are longer-term, but include a teaching component that helps students learn how to behave well all the time.

So how can you make sure your reward plan doesn't become bribery? Remember these points:

- **Timing is important.** The day after your students drive a substitute to tears is not the day to introduce a new reward system. They'll think that their bad behavior is being rewarded.
- **Be consistent.** If you tell students that everyone who hands in homework gets a sticker, then be ready to hand out stickers every day.

- **Think small.** The real reward should be the pleasure that comes from doing things right. So while you are handing out those homework stickers, be sure to praise each student: "Good work, Dayton. You're doing all your math problems." "Jack, you're really starting to learn those new vocabulary words."

If you want to start a rewards program in your classroom, think it through carefully. What behaviors are you trying to change? What rewards will you offer? Spell these out clearly and follow through—every time. You'll be rewarding positive behavior, not offering a bribe.

Source: Virginia M. Shiller, *Rewards for Kids!*
ISBN: 1-591-47006-4 (APA Life Tools, 1-800-374-2721,
<http://books.apa.org/lifetools/>).

Resources



Research is clear. When students are motivated to learn, they are less likely to be disruptive. They also do better in school. *Activating the Desire to Learn* is a research-based, practical book. Teacher Bob Sullo summarizes research, provides case studies and offers guidelines on building students' inherent drive to learn. An online study guide offers further support for teachers. (ISBN: 1-4166-0423-5, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.)



This month, every child is thinking about pumpkins. First-grade teachers can use pumpkins to teach high-interest lessons in math, reading and social studies. "Great Pumpkins" is a unit developed by New York's Agriculture in the Classroom Program (www.cerp.cornell.edu/aitc/Great_Pumpkins.asp). These free downloadable lessons include a student workbook and exciting activity ideas. Students will learn how pumpkins grow. They'll estimate (and then count) pumpkin seeds.



Wouldn't it be great if you could put your class in a time machine? You can if you visit the Colonial Williamsburg website. Tour the town. Meet the people in this colonial capital. Do "Math in a Mobcap!" For a fee, you can also take part in a virtual field trip that includes a live television broadcast. Visit the site at www.history.org.

Mathematics

Give students daily practice with mental math



Think of how you use math in your everyday life. You figure a tip in a restaurant. You decide whether you can afford to buy a new suit—even one that's on sale. You keep track of what you're spending in the grocery store.

Most of us don't use calculators to do those math problems. We use our heads. And while we might not come up with the exact answer, we'll be close.

That's a skill you need to help your students develop. Each day, you can probably find a minute or two to try some mental math problems. (These make good sponge activities for waiting in line to go to lunch or the last few minutes before dismissal.)

Remember these tips:

- **Keep mental math problems** easy to solve. If you are just teaching students to add two-digit numbers, mental math problems should review adding and subtracting single digits.
- **Teach shortcuts.** Suppose you asked students, "Add three plus six plus seven." Some students will quickly realize that they can move the numbers around. (Three plus seven equals ten, and six more is 16.)
- **Jot down problems** on index cards. Use one or two each day.

Source: Lola May, "Developing Mental Math," *Teaching preK-8*, January 2000 (1-800-249-9363, www.teaching-k-8.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 n: Helping Students At-Risk

Teaching Every Student

Use dictionaries as valuable tools



The dictionary is an invaluable resource for English language learners. Students can use it to look up the meanings of common words or how to pronounce unfamiliar words. But you can use a dictionary in other ways to enrich your students' language experience.

It's best to have a variety of dictionaries on hand. For example:

- **Bilingual dictionaries** for students who are good readers in their native language.
- **English dictionaries** for students who aren't literate in their native language.
- **Picture dictionaries** so students can learn the English words for common objects.
- **Electronic dictionaries** that allow students to hear words as they look up meanings.

Sometimes, the best dictionaries are those students create themselves. Help students develop lists of favorite words. Start with subjects that interest them. Sports fans will want to learn words like *fullback* or *stadium*, while animal lovers will quickly learn words like *horse* and *dog*.

When you are conversing with students, look over their personal lists. Try to give them practice using these words to talk about subjects they love.

Source: Jerry Jesness, *Teaching English Language Learners K-12*, ISBN: 0-761-93187-2 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

At-Risk Students

Maintain standards for all students



It is tempting to “go easy” on students who may have special needs that affect their academics and behavior. But this rarely does students a favor. Instead, it reinforces a student's belief that “my differences mean I can't do it”—probably not the attitude you want to foster.

You may need to work with the modifications and accommodations required for a particular student. But you can still require:

- **Attentive behavior.** Try having some students work while seated next to you.
- **Completed homework** (with accommodations or modifications, if applicable).
- **Doing their own work**—not looking at a neighbor's paper.



Illustration by Bob George

- **Courtesy.** Work with students, parents and other staff to make it a behavioral goal.
- **Respect** for self, other people and property. It should be clear that disrespect will not be tolerated.

Source: Joanne Eisenberger et al., *Self-Efficacy: Raising the Bar for All Students*, ISBN: 1-930556-95-0 (Eye on Education, 1-888-299-5350, www.eyeoneducation.com).

Setting High Expectations

Use rubrics to make your expectations clear



Most students—even those at risk—*want* to do a good job. But they don't always know what that means.

You can help by making your expectations as clear as possible. If students (and their parents) know what is required for a top grade, more of your at-risk students are likely to rise to the occasion.

For example, suppose you have assigned students to develop a poster on the life cycle of a butterfly. And you tell students that it is worth 20 points. Will all students earn the full 20 points? Probably not.

But what would a student have to do to earn full marks? What would the student need to do to earn 15 or 10 points? Under what circumstances might a student earn zero points?

Write down the answers to these questions in the form of a rubric. Be as specific as possible. For example, you may want students to use at least seven colors. You may want clear and neat lettering.

Hand out the rubric outlining your expectations together with the assignment—and expect the best.

Source: Dr. Kathie Nunley, “Rubrics,” Layered Curriculum, www.help4teachers.com/rubrics.htm.