

Better Teaching[®]

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Secondary
EDITION

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Bringing Lessons to Life

Examine past & future energy needs



This Earth Day, April 22nd, examine energy needs today—and compare them with energy needs in the future. Help your students analyze the growing need for energy and consider ways to use renewable energy sources.

Have students:

1. **Create a time line** of the 20th century. Highlight some of the inventions that have increased the need for energy—the automobile, the air-plane, home electricity, air conditioners and personal computers. (Visit <http://inventors.about.com> and click on “20th Century Inventions.”)
2. **Discuss each invention** and how it has affected energy use.
3. **Conduct independent research** on: current status of our nation’s energy supply; problems if we rely too heavily on current forms of energy; conservation efforts that seem to be working (hybrid cars, CFL light bulbs, solar panels, wind turbines).
4. **Work in groups to research** various forms of renewable energy. Is your local utility purchasing any energy from renewable sources? Are there state or local policies designed to encourage energy conservation or the use of renewable energy? How hard would it be to switch to renewable energy sources?
5. **Make a presentation** about life in the future. In 25 years, what do they think the pattern of energy use in this country will be? What about their own personal energy use? Do they think they will use more or less energy than today?
6. **Use their research and opinions** to write editorial letters to the school and local newspapers.
7. **Develop action plans** to motivate students in school to use less energy today.

Source: “Renewable Energy,” Earth Day Network, www.rprogress.org/education/k-12pdf/renewableenergy.pdf.

Connecting With Parents

Involve parents, boost learning with TIPS



The Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns

Hopkins University has developed a program to engage parents in homework. Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) works because:

- **All families can be involved**, not just those who know the subject.
- **Parents are not expected** to teach their children, just talk with them.
- **Students share** what they have learned in class with their families.
- **Home-school communication** is encouraged.

TIPS homework assignments require students to engage parents and family members in a discussion of the content being studied. Printed discussion guides (in English and Spanish) are sent home each week. To implement the TIPS program, follow seven steps:

1. **Identify content areas** where the TIPS approach can be used.
2. **Select topics** that will promote parent/student interaction.
3. **Explain the process** to students and parents.
4. **Adapt TIPS activities** to the curriculum and other standards.
5. **Give TIPS assignments** on a regular schedule.
6. **Provide feedback to parents** and evaluate the assignments.
7. **Make adjustments** to improve future TIPS assignments.

Source: “Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork,” The Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/tips/index.htm.

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Testing Tips

Quick feedback boosts learning

a. — Immediate feedback can turn the time right after your next test into a learning opportunity. If answers are short or one-word responses, as in true/false tests, multiple choice tests or fill-in-the-blank tests, here's a strategy to try.

Have students:

1. **Create an answer sheet** with two identical columns by drawing a line down the center of the sheet (or folding the sheet vertically in half).
2. **Write their names** at the tops of both columns.
3. **Number the lines** down the left side of each column.
4. **Write answers to the test** questions on the same numbered lines in *both* columns.
5. **Tear the sheet in half** to separate the columns when the test is finished.
6. **Turn in one column** and keep the other copy as a reference.

When all students have submitted answer sheets, go over the test allowing students to use the papers they kept. Later you can grade the answer sheets submitted to you.

Source: Rick Wormeli, *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessing & Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*, ISBN: 1-57110-424-0 (Stenhouse Publishers, 1-800-988-9812, www.stenhouse.com).

Working With ELL Students: Part One of a Four-Part Series

Create opportunities for students to speak



It's a truism—but it's also true—that you learn to speak a language by *speaking* it.

Students whose friends and families speak little or no English have fewer opportunities to gain the practice they need. Here are some ways to help:

- **Practice role plays.** For students who are just beginning to learn English, create real-life situations they may face: a trip to the dentist, buying groceries, ordering at a fast food place. More advanced students can play the role of the dentist or the clerk. Ask students to create their own scenarios, too. What situations in their lives would they like to prepare for?
- **Pair students with English speakers.** Ask people from your community to spend one-on-one time with your English language learners. Adults could serve as mentors for students,

while also giving them valuable practice in speaking English in a low-risk environment. Or ask students who serve as tutors to pair up with students just learning English. That way, they will have someone to talk with in the hallway and before and after school.

- **Create class activities** that focus on speaking. Cooperative learning groups may give ELL students a chance to share their thoughts with a small group of students. They also provide a way to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills. Choose groups carefully so others will be supportive of what the ELL student has to say. Think-pair-share activities are also a good way to encourage oral communication.

Source: Jerry Jesness, *Teaching English Language Learners K-12: A Quick-Start Guide for the New Teacher*, ISBN: 0-761-93187-2 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Teaching Thinking Skills

Learning activities promote critical thinking



What are employers looking for today? Workers who can think critically and creatively. In this era of high technology, they want employees who can not only gather and store data, but also use it to solve problems.

And what are students looking for? Classes where teachers make learning lively and fun. To engage students in higher-order thinking, try these activity-based learning ideas:

- **Build critical thinking** into all areas of your instruction.
- **Promote independent gathering** of data and group problem solving. For example, have students analyze and debate current events. Group work makes learning fun and keeps students engaged.

- **Use case studies that engage** students in thinking about real-life applications in your content area.
- **Get out of the classroom.** When possible take students to see and experience relevant locations.
- **Assign projects** that require students to use their skills—and benefit society, as well.
- **Design exams to include** analysis and evaluation.

Creative thinking can get students “fired up” about your subject area. And excited students are more likely to attend class, participate in discussions and retain information.

Source: Anne L. Sweaney, “Fostering Critical Thinking: Making Learning Fun,” in *Extraordinary Teachers: The Essence of Excellent Teaching*, ISBN: 0-7407-1860-6 (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1-800-943-9839, www.andrewsmcmeel.com).

Teaching Social Skills

Build a community of learners in your class



It's a well-known fact that peer relationships are at the top of any secondary student's list of priorities. Take advantage of that to promote learning. When your classroom becomes a caring community, your students will be more likely to take academic risks, acquire new skills and understand that they are in an environment where learning is valued.

How do you create such a community of learners? Here are some basic guidelines:

- **Demonstrate respect** for every one of your students.
- **Take time to learn** about your students' personal lives. Many may be taking on more responsibility at home. Be aware of their social interactions with each other, as well.

- **Engage students in decision making.** Support their growing independence as learners.
- **Model the behavior you expect.** Walk into class with a positive attitude. Smile and speak to your students as they arrive.
- **Expect students to help** one another. Provide opportunities for students to work with partners and in groups.
- **Make it safe to make a mistake.**
- **Reward positive social behavior.** Students will imitate behavior that is rewarded.
- **Emphasize mutual goal setting** and shared responsibility.

Source: Dave F. Brown, "Urban Teachers' Professed Classroom Management Strategies: Reflections of Culturally Responsive Teaching," *Urban Education*, May 2004 (Corwin Press, Inc., 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Resources



As you prepare to celebrate Earth Day, check out the Environmental Protection Agency's website for teachers. If students want to know about the health of their neighborhood, this site is the place to start (www.epa.gov/teachers/neighborhood.htm). It includes links to a wealth of resources by zip code. You'll find facts about hazardous waste sites and up-to-the-minute data on air quality.



Celebrate National Library Week (April 13–19). Tap into a great resource from the American Library Association. Students can download "Research Projects: An Information Literacy Planner for Students" at www.alastore.ala.org/img/631.pdf. Included are a task checklist, a page for brainstorming ideas, a template for outlines, templates for taking notes and recording sources, guidelines for a bibliography and a self-assessment.



Everyone's going green these days, and April is the month to highlight environmentally-friendly activities. How much paper is generated in your classroom? Do you and your students recycle? If not, challenge them to help you get started. You'll find great resources on the Paper Industry Association Council's website at www.paperrecycles.org. Articles highlight secondary schools that have received grants and won awards for recycling. You'll also find a "tools for teachers" section.

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.

Technology

Social networking sites not fit for school



Do you have a MySpace or Facebook page? What does it say about you?

A growing number of school districts have taken action against teachers for information they posted on their personal networking pages. From Florida to Oregon to Pennsylvania, teachers have been disciplined, and in some cases even fired, for information on their MySpace, Flickr or Facebook pages.

Now some school districts are considering policies to limit "inappropriate" contact between teachers and students on online network sites. At this point, there is little consensus on what "inappropriate" means. Here are some protective guidelines:

- **Protect your image.** Remember that you can never truly erase

something you post online. If you use a social networking site to communicate with friends, think carefully about what you post.

- **Set up other ways** to communicate with students. Many teachers have a personal policy of never using their online networking sites to communicate with students. Create a class website or set up a professional email address so students can reach you.
- **Protect your privacy**—at a minimum. Most networking sites will allow you to limit what is shown to others.

Source: April Simpson, "Scituate Eyes Teacher Use of Networking Websites," *The Boston Globe*, www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2007/04/16/scituate_eye_s_teachers_use_of_networking_websites.

Focus Discipline

Classroom Management

Keep your rules from falling apart



As the year wears on, some teachers manage to maintain a positive and productive classroom environment. Others struggle, with discipline problems growing more frequent. How can you keep your rules from falling apart? Here are some tips:

- **Go back to what worked.** If your classroom discipline has started to slip a bit, odds are it's because you are not consistent about enforcing the rules. Go back to what you did at the beginning of the school year.
- **Don't play to the crowd.** For a teen, a public reprimand will nearly always produce a negative reaction. Instead of calling out a student in front of the class, seek a less public place.
- **Use nonverbal** communication whenever possible. The less attention you pay to negative behavior, the better. Many teachers develop "The Look"—a no-nonsense facial expression that tells students you mean business.
- **Keep focused.** Give a short reprimand and then get back to teaching your lesson. The less students can distract you from teaching, the less time they'll waste on misbehavior.

Source: Howard Seeman, *Preventing Classroom Discipline Problems*, ISBN: 978-1-56676-834-9 (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 1-800-462-6420 www.rowmaneducation.com).

Building Responsibility

Allow students to extend due dates



The big project is due today. As you expected, two students are mysteriously absent. Another student says she "forgot" her project at home.

Are you tired of listening to these excuses? Create a Due Date Extension Form. (Even the tax department sometimes allows an extension!)

To make students take responsibility for not meeting the deadline:

- **Ask students to choose** a new due date.
- **Have them describe fully** the work they have completed on the project thus far.
- **Ask them to submit the form** explaining why they need extra time and attach a copy of the work they have done so far.



Illustration by Bob George

You do not always have to grant every requested extension. But you will be giving students more responsibility for their own learning. You may even see better projects.

Source: ReLeah Cossett Lent, *Engaging Adolescent Learners: A Guide for Content-Area Teachers*, ISBN: 0-3250-0843-4 (Heinemann, a division of Reed Elsevier, 1-800-225-5800, www.heinemann.com).

Working With Parents

Solve discipline issues with parents' help



Robert has disrupted your class numerous times and you've taken action. He must now report for after-school detention. His parents are angry. They think you're being unfair and they've complained. You have a conference set up to discuss their concerns. To structure the conference to get their support:

- **Include Robert** in the conference. Begin by asking him to recap what he told his parents. Nine times out of 10 a student will change his story to the truth and his parents will calm down.
- **Ask Robert's counselor**, your principal or another staff member to sit in on the conference.
- **Listen carefully** as the parents speak. Then rephrase what they have said.
- **Have copies of previous** communication printed and available. Sometimes parents say they have not been informed that a problem existed.
- **Tell Robert's parents** how his behavior is affecting his academic performance in your class.
- **Develop solutions** to the problem together. Create a system to give his parents feedback on how Robert is doing.

Source: John H. Wherry, Ed.D., "Working With Difficult Parents," *Principal Magazine*, March/April 2008 (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1-800-386-2377, www.naesp.org).