

Better Teaching[®]

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Secondary
EDITION

Northeast USD 246
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Bringing Lessons to Life

Turn students into history detectives



The explosion occurred at 9:40 p.m. on the night of February 15, 1898. More than five tons of gunpowder sent the Battleship *Maine* to the bottom of Havana Harbor with 260 sailors on board.

In an ordinary history class, this pattern of presenting facts might provoke students to ask, “So why does this matter today?” But if you turn your students into history detectives, these facts are the first in a series of clues they will need to solve the case.

That was the approach taken by veteran teacher John Fuchs. Given the popularity of TV detective shows, he turned students in his American Studies class into history gumshoes.

After presenting the basic facts, he asked them to come up with their own theories. Who could have been responsible? Was it an accident? Could the explosion have been the work of terrorists? What would have been the motive?

He wrote students’ theories on the board. Next to each, he wrote the word “WHY.” So the student who suggested that Cubans might have blown up the *Maine*, for example, was asked to come up with at least one reason why.

For homework, students were asked to conduct additional research, choose one of the hypotheses and write an essay defending that choice.

Then, in small groups, students analyzed the possible choices. Were they logical? Did they hold up? Finally, they tried to agree on an explanation that held the most supporting evidence.

In the case of the *Maine*, Fuchs concluded by telling students that historians don’t know what really happened. But as new evidence emerges, they follow the same detection strategies that students had used to draw reasonable conclusions.

Source: John Fuchs, “History Detectives,” *Teaching preK-8*, October 2006 (1-800-249-9363, www.teachingk-8.com).

Helping At-Risk Students

Expect *all* of your students to achieve



The pattern is repeated over and over. A student becomes disengaged from school. “It’s boring!” Parents don’t expect much and teachers fail to see any potential. By the time the student enters high school, the student’s self-image is one of failure.

Today, approximately one-third of all high school students drop out. And the figures are even higher for minority student populations.

Try these ideas to reverse the trend:

- **Expect success.** Have you already written off some of your students? Is your biggest expectation that they not disrupt your class? Your students will expect no more of themselves than you expect of them. And once a student’s self-image includes failure, that student is a candidate for dropping out.
- **Base your lessons on real-life applications.** Students in gifted programs are engaged in creative ways that promote critical thinking. Use the same strategies to motivate *all* your students.
- **Find a connection.** Build on your students’ interests and abilities. For example, say, “I know you think gas prices are high. I thought this article on ethanol was quite interesting. After you read it, tell me if you agree with the author’s ideas.”

Source: Christine Finnan and Gene Chasin, “Accelerating the Learning of Low-Achieving Students: The Transformation of a Dropout,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2007 (Phi Delta Kappa International, 1-800-766-1156, www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm).

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Teaching Study Skills

Get your students off to a good start



You tell your students what chapters to read.

You even distribute a printed syllabus and post assignments on your website. Now, help them with their study skills. Share these tips for getting the most out of their textbook reading:

- **Preview the chapter.** How long is it? Will you read it all at once or in sections? Schedule a time to read it when you can concentrate. Turn off the TV, the radio and your cell phone.
- **Read the introduction** and the chapter summary first.
- **Skim the questions** at the end of the chapter to get an idea of what is important.
- **Read in chunks.** Turn bold-faced headings into questions. As you finish a section, answer your question.
- **Don't forget the graphics.** How do they add to your understanding of the text?
- **Focus on vocabulary.** Write each key word on a file card with its definition on the back.

Just as you go over homework in class, review how students have been studying. Help them establish study habits now that will help them succeed all year.

Understanding Poverty: Part Three of a Three-Part Series

Use strategies to close the 'achievement gap'



On average, NBA players Yao Ming (7'6") and Earl Boykins (5'5") are 6'4".

But clearly, that average does not give a true picture.

The same is true for students. On average, students may be achieving well, but there are some groups of students—especially those living in poverty—who are struggling. Closing that “achievement gap” is one of the biggest challenges facing schools today. The good news is that you can help all your students learn. Try these strategies:

- **Show students how to link** what they are learning to things they have already mastered. Tell them (or better yet, *show* them) how they'll use this in the “real world.” Research shows that students can be more successful in class if they understand the reasons why they are doing the work.

- **Help students organize** their learning. Start by giving them graphic organizers they can complete as they read or listen in class. Also teach students note-taking skills.
- **Teach goal setting.** Help students set both long-term goals and daily goals for achievement in your class. For students who may not have had a great deal of success in school, meeting daily goals is one important way to build confidence that they *can* do the work.
- **Inform students** about how they will be assessed. Hand out your grading rubric when you give a big assignment. Review it with students. “As you can see, spelling and grammar count for 10 percent of your final grade, so be sure to proofread.”

Source: Bonnie M. Davis, *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You: Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies*, ISBN: 1-412-92447-2 (Corwin Press, Inc., 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Reading

Promote leisure reading to boost test scores



According to a U.S. Department of Education report, students who read for fun score higher on reading tests. So it makes sense to promote out-of-class reading. Here are some ideas:

- **Calculate time spent reading.** The American Time Use Survey says that 15- to 24-year-olds watch an average of two and a half hours of TV per day—but spend only nine minutes a day reading! Ask your students to keep a time log for a week. Have them calculate how much time they spend reading. Challenge them to increase their leisure reading time.
- **Focus on vocabulary.** Studies say students learn more new words

through leisure reading than through classroom instruction. And vocabulary skills are key to improved test scores.

- **Start a competition.** Which of your classes can list more new words from their leisure reading? Have them post the word, the definition and the source.
- **Promote the library.** Invite your librarian for a PR session on the “fun” books in your school library. Allow students to check out books on the spot.

Source: Sunil Iyengar and Mark Bauerlein, “It's Not Just the Schools: Leisure Time, Reading, Reading and the Competition for Young Minds,” *Education Week*, April 18, 2007 (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., 1-800-728-2790, www.edweek.org).

Keeping Classrooms Safe

What's your plan for lockdown or evacuation?



The 2006–2007 school year saw tragedies on school campuses from Pennsylvania to Virginia, as well as unexpected weather-related catastrophes. As this school year begins, review how you will respond in the event of a crisis. Use the following checklist to evaluate your preparedness:

For an evacuation. Have you:

- ___ Reviewed your school plan for leaving the building?
- ___ Considered an alternate exit route should your way be blocked?
- ___ Planned for evacuation of your special needs students?
- ___ Discussed your crisis-response plan with your students?
- ___ Told students where you will reassemble once you are outside?
- ___ Identified the site of a first aid kit?

___ Prepared a file you can quickly grab containing complete information for each student, a map of the school and other essentials?

For a lockdown. Do you:

- ___ Have a plan for locking your door and covering your windows?
- ___ Have a plan for monitoring students for an extended period of time in your classroom?
- ___ Have access to first aid supplies?

At the beginning of the year, share your crisis-response information with parents. Tell them how they will get information about their student in the event of a crisis and how students will be released after the event.

Source: Bill Lockyer and Delaine Easton, "Crisis Response Box: Partnering for Safe Schools," Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center and the California Department of Education's Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office, www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/cp/documents/crisisresinbox.pdf.

Connecting With Students

Move beyond 'Don't smile until Christmas'



Not long ago, teachers were given the advice, "Don't smile until Christmas." Today, teachers know that building relationships with students can be a powerful teaching tool.

But how close is too close? Here are some ways teachers can maintain a professional approach while still creating positive relationships with students:

- **Share interests.** You won't (and shouldn't) tell them all about your personal life. But if you love rock climbing ... or the Mariners ... or *American Idol*, those are interests that your students might share. Even if they're dyed-in-the-wool Tigers fans, they'll appreciate knowing that you enjoy sports.

Sharing interests can have a side benefit. It's easier to plan lessons that build on students' interests once you know what they are!

- **Spend time at school events.** Volunteer to chaperone a dance. Attend a football or field hockey game. Go to the choral concert. Your students and their parents will be grateful for your presence.
- **Use humor—with care.** There's a fine line between humor and sarcasm, and teachers should never cross it. Telling a joke that makes students laugh at your foibles is fine. Making fun of a student is not.

Source: Thomas Mawhinney and Laura L. Sagan, "The Power of Personal Relationships," *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2007 (1-800-766-1156, www.pdkintl.org).

Resources



Maybe you're the department's resident "geek" who would like to connect with other techno-savvy teachers. Or maybe you're a beginner who'd like to learn more about this whole blogging thing. In either case, you'll find resources and make great connections on Classroom 2.0. Think of it as MySpace for educators. From great resources to personal pages, this networking site is a helpful technology resource for all teachers (<http://classroom20.ning.com>).



Graduation may be months, or years, away for your students, but motivate them to start planning now. Post a PDF of *Funding Education Beyond High School: The Guide to Federal Student Aid/ 2007–2008* on your class website. It's available in both English and Spanish. Your students (and their parents) will find it a useful source of information on grants, loans and work-study programs. Go to www.studentaid.ed.gov/students/publications/student_guide/index.html.



Teaching middle school can be daunting for first-year teachers. MiddleWeb provides "Special Resources for New Middle Grades Teachers." Go to www.middleweb.com/mw/PartInt/PartIntNewTchr.html to find advice from experienced teachers, a survival guide, a tool for connecting with parents, tips for disciplining students, suggestions for homework that works and more!

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: Classroom Management

Next Focus On:
At-Risk Students

Discipline

Deal with your difficult students from day one



Sometimes you just *know*. From the first day of school, teachers can often spot the student who is going to be disruptive.

Fortunately, there are some things you can do to avoid problems in the classroom.

The most important rule, of course, is to keep your cool. If you lose your temper, the student has won.

Here are some strategies that will help you keep calm—and keep your classroom in control:

- **Set a positive tone.** From the first day, let your students see that you want everyone to succeed.
- **Be clear about expectations** and consequences. Once you have set class rules, be firm, fair and consistent in enforcing them.
- **Keep a disruptive student** closer to you than to other students with whom there might be potentially negative interactions.
- **Offer cues.** Alert students a few minutes before you intend to change activities.
- **Give second chances** whenever you can.
- **Keep a log.** See what triggers misbehavior.

Source: Randi Stone, *Best Classroom Management Practices for Reaching All Learners*, ISBN: 1-412-90970-8 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Teaching Tips

Use audio recorders as helpful tools



You've given the same instructions every day. But Johnny and Meg, who have attention disorders, can't seem to remember what to do.

Save your voice—and your temper. You can use an audio recorder as an adaptive device in your classroom.

Here are some ways a recorder can reduce the daily strain on your voice:

Record directions for class routines. Students who need to can listen to them as many times as necessary.

If you are giving a quiz and some students are absent, make a recording. They can easily retake the test when they return.

Consider allowing students to record your lectures. This is especially good for auditory learners or students who are English language learners.



Illustration by Bob George

Ask for volunteers to record your textbooks. (This is something parents can do at home.) Students with reading difficulties can read along as they listen.

Source: Sandra Rief, *The ADD/ADHD Checklist*, ISBN: 0-137-62395-X (Prentice Hall Publishers, 1-800-631-8571, www.prenticehall.com).

Classroom Management

You can control your students' behavior



Successful teachers know the powerful connection between effective classroom management and academic success. That sounds great, but how do you make it happen? Try these tips when behavior problems are getting you down:

- **Don't mirror student behavior.** Is a student yelling? Respond with a whisper. Are your students sullen? Respond with humor. Is a student distracting the whole class? Talk privately.
- **Shift the focus.** Are you the center of attraction in your classroom? Move the spotlight to well-behaved students.
- **Allow a misbehaving student** to save face. Does your class clown constantly interrupt your lesson? Instead of taking class time to get the student settled down, use your best "teacher glare" and then say, "It's a good thing I like you; now let's get to work."
- **Ask for help.** Do you think your classroom management problems are out of control? You're not alone. Ask a veteran teacher for tips. Share concerns with a counselor.

Source: Margaret Metzger, "Learning to Discipline," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2002 (Phi Delta Kappa International, 1-800-766-1156, www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm).