

# 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

## Guide your 'mushers' through Alaska



The first Saturday in March is a red-letter day in Alaska. It marks the start of the

annual Iditarod Dog Sled Race. Teams of 12 to 16 dogs cross more than 1,150 miles of Alaskan terrain with their mushers. The race, which takes 10 to 17 days, begins in south central Alaska in Anchorage. It ends in Nome on the coast of the Bering Sea.

In your classroom, following the Iditarod can mean days of active learning. It offers opportunities to try exciting lessons across the core disciplines.

Have learning fun with these ideas:

- **Explore the terrain.** Alaska's terrain is unlike that of any other state. Go to the Iditarod's official website at [www.iditarod.com](http://www.iditarod.com) for ideas and a map of the trail. Reproduce the map for your classroom. Assign a student or group of students to each team of dogs. Each group can track its team's progress on the website and put a marker on the map for each

milestone the dogs reach. At each milestone, assign students to research that part of Alaska.

- **Discover the Iditarod in numbers.** The possibilities are numerous, depending on the level of your students. For example: *Add* up the total number of dogs or mushers in the race. *Multiply* to find out the total miles covered by all dogs. *Divide* to find out the average number of miles covered each day.
- **Make it a reading race.** Students can earn one mile for each page read. Give each student a personal goal. For some, matching the 1,150 miles of the Iditarod is more than feasible; others may need to work toward a different milestone.

Check the Teacher on the Trail program for great lesson plans and teacher blogs ([www.iditarod.com/teachers/tott.html](http://www.iditarod.com/teachers/tott.html)).

**Source:** Walter McKenzie, "The Iditarod: The Last Great Race," Education World, [www.education-world.com/a\\_lesson/lesson103.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson103.shtml).

Helping Students Learn

## Advance organizers help students learn



Teaching new material to students can be like asking them to head into unfamiliar territory without road maps.

Why not provide advance organizers to use as road maps? They'll give students a cognitive strategy for learning and retaining information.

Research shows that advance organizers help students learn and retain more. When information is presented graphically, as well as verbally, all students—including those with disabilities—learn both the content and the vocabulary of the new material.

Perhaps the most well-known advance organizer is the KWL chart. As students list what they already *know*, what they *want* to find out, and then what they have *learned*, they get an idea of how to link what they are learning to what they already know.

To use advance organizers:

- **Focus on the most important information.** Give students a "preview of coming attractions"—showing them what they will be learning.
- **Present information graphically** if you can. Pictures and charts will make it easier for students to remember key points.
- **Use technology where you can.** A colorful, dynamic organizer will be even more memorable than a black-and-white chart.

**Source:** William N. Bender, *Differentiating Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities: Best Teaching Practices for General and Special Educators*, ISBN: 0-6136-5025-5 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).

## Listening & Following Directions

### Help your students follow directions



Most students follow group directions well; others need more individualized attention. When you need to connect with a student who has trouble following your directions:

- **Use statements, not questions.** Say, "Please sit down and finish your work." Don't ask, "Would you like to sit down and finish your work?"
- **Stand close to the student.** You will communicate your strong interest in getting a response. It also allows you to speak in a soft voice, but still be heard.
- **Look at the student** and say politely, "I have something to say, but I really need to have you look at me. Thank you."
- **Give the student directions.** Have him repeat them. Ask the student to follow the directions, but do not ask more than twice. Put consequences into place if necessary. Thank him for cooperating if he *does* follow your directions.

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

## Motivating Students: Part Three of a Four-Part Series

### Deserved praise *deserves* the right language



How do you deliver praise? If you find yourself using vague, tired phrases, then think about whether you really meant to praise the student in the first place.

Students can tell the difference between sincere praise and hollow words. Sincere praise will motivate and encourage students. Hollow words can make them skeptical—about you, and about their ability to do their work.

The next time you deliver praise:

- **Be specific.** Tell the student exactly what she's doing right. "I was so pleased with your work today, Amy. When you couldn't solve the math problem the first time, you recalled a strategy we used in class and tried that."
- **Avoid clichés.** "Good job!" is probably the "praise" teachers utter most often. It may spill out of your

mouth before you even realize it. If your student deserves praise, then your student deserves praise that's genuine and specific.

- **Avoid downplaying** a student's problem in an attempt to praise. This is not praise. Statements like, "This shouldn't be a problem for you" may be meant to communicate that you think the student has the ability and skills to do the work.

But the student may not take it this way—instead, he may feel you are placating him or even making fun of him. "You seem to be struggling with this; let's find out why," is a better choice of words for motivation.

**Source:** Susan Mandel Glazer, "Spontaneous Praise," *TeachingK-8*, April 2007 (Early Years, Inc., 1-800-678-8793, www.TeachingK-8.com).

## At-Risk Students

### Help your students overcome their anxieties



For some students, pressure acts as a motivator. But for others—especially those students who are at risk—pressure can cause them to freeze up. That's particularly true of the pressure of high-stakes testing.

Recently, the American Association for the Advancement of Science brought together leading scholars and researchers to look at the issue of math anxiety. They found scientific evidence that math anxiety really exists for some people. But you can teach your students some ways to overcome their anxieties. And this can apply to any subject.

Here's how you can help:

- **Acknowledge the anxiety.** Telling students, "It's all in your head" does not help.

- **Get students to slow down.** Individuals with high levels of anxiety tend to rush through problems. That makes them more likely to make careless errors. Teach students to work deliberately.
- **Practice.** The timed element of high-stakes tests can be a real problem for some. Give your students regular practice with timed quizzes. But make them enjoyable—if everyone in the class finishes in less than five minutes, you'll wear a silly hat.
- **Focus on working out problems** and concepts that give "anxious" students the most trouble.

**Source:** Sean Cavanagh, "Understanding 'Math Anxiety,'" *Teacher Magazine*, February 21, 2007, www.teacher-magazine.org/tm/articles/2007/02/21/ew\_math.htm.

## Keeping Students on Task

### Use 'quick checks' to keep students focused



You are midway through explaining a new concept when you look at your students. Two are staring out the window. One is wiggling a loose tooth. Two are whispering to each other. Here are some ways you can check students' understanding while presenting your lesson:

- **Use white boards.** Many teachers use small individual white boards so students can quickly answer a question. When students hold up their boards, it's easy to check for understanding.
- **Use cues.** As you're teaching a new subject, stop regularly to have students show you their level of understanding. Ask, "How many of you think you could do this

right now?" Then have them show you thumbs up for *yes*, thumbs down for *no* and thumbs sideways for *maybe*.

Or try using colored cards—green, red and yellow—for the same purpose.

- **Read body language.** If a third of your students are gazing out the window, odds are they aren't learning about the life cycle of a butterfly. Sure signals that student attention is wandering include: limited or no eye contact, unfocused eyes, and a head resting on a hand or on the desk.

**Source:** Karen Bosch, *Planning Classroom Management: A Five-Step Process to Creating a Positive Learning Environment*, ISBN: 1-41293-768-X (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

## Resources



In a perfect world, all students would be ready and willing to work each day. But in the real world, teachers may need more help. *Inspiring Active Learning: A Complete Handbook for Today's Teachers*, written by teachers Merrill Harmin and Melanie Toth, is no theoretical tome. The book is filled with specific, easy-to-implement strategies to start or end class efficiently, present new content or help students master content. (ISBN: 1-41660-155-4, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org.)



Do your students know what  $\frac{1}{8}$  looks like? Is  $\frac{1}{8}$  the same as  $.125$ ? Many students struggle with fractions. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics has developed a great math resource. You'll find a fraction model for your students at <http://illustrations.nctm.org/ActivityDetail.aspx?ID=11>. Here students can use sliding graphs to create various fractions ( $\frac{1}{8}$ ,  $\frac{2}{3}$ , etc.). The resulting fractions are then shown graphically by coloring in segments of a circle, square or rectangle. They are also shown as fractions, decimals and percentages.

## Ideas to Share

### Let students select the 'Number of the Year'



It may not be as prestigious as the Best Motion Picture award, but the "Number of the Year" award always generates excitement. Here's a fun activity to help your students think about how numbers affect their lives:

1. **Tell students** they have been selected to choose a Number of the Year from contestants numbered 0 through 9. Their job as judges is to think about which number truly is the most important. Their decisions should be based both on the number's mathematical contributions and on its significance in their lives.
2. **Have each student select** a personal candidate for the award. Students will often choose numbers that seem to appear frequently in their lives. "I was born on

the third, I have three fish and there are three children in my family."

3. **Ask students to write** a convincing essay stating their reasons for selecting a particular number. The essay gives students a chance to show off their creativity.
4. **Collect all the essays** and tabulate the results. Tell students which number has won the Number of the Year award. This activity combines math reasoning with language arts skills. It could serve as a culminating activity in a persuasive writing unit or even as a final writing and math project for the end of the year.

**Source:** Randi Stone, *Best Practices for Teaching Mathematics*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-2455-9 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

## 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. 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 Discipline

Working With Students

### Use the right approach with ADHD students



Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is the most common mental health problem of childhood. It presents a challenge for both students and teachers, but it is manageable with the right approach.

It will help if you:

- **Keep rules brief**, specific and consistent. Post rules on the board or on the wall. Students with ADHD usually benefit from visual cues.
- **Have a plan** for misbehavior (and also for improved behavior.) Offer rewards and impose consequences swiftly. Wait too long, and students may forget the connection between the behavior and the result.
- **Give students feedback** throughout the day.
- **Prepare for transitions** with plenty of advance warning. Switching to a new activity or location can be a great challenge for students with ADHD. No sooner have they learned the rules for one situation than the situation changes.
- **Get into the habit** of thinking ahead—and aloud.
- **Go over your expectations** with students both verbally and visually.

**Source:** Russell Barkley, *Taking Charge of ADHD*, ISBN: 1-57230-560-6 (Guilford Press, 1-800-365-7006, www.guilford.com).

Discipline

### Negotiate a contract for behavior



A student who has not responded to warnings or other lower-intervention forms of discipline may improve after signing a behavior contract with you.

Contracts work best when you can single out one area of difficulty the student would benefit from resolving. Multiple contracts or several behavioral difficulties on one contract may confuse and frustrate the student (and you!) and do more harm than good.

To negotiate the contract:

1. **Hold a one-on-one conference** to discuss the behavior you want the student to change. Make sure the student understands *why* the behavior should change.
2. **Discuss an appropriate reward** for improved behavior.

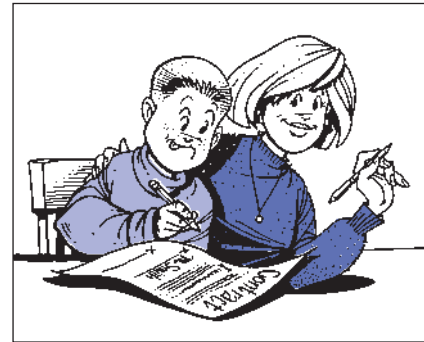


Illustration by Bob George

3. **Outline exactly** what the student must do (or stop doing) in order to earn the reward.
4. **Write everything down**, including a date when you will meet again.
5. **Sign it together.** Consider asking another adult to sign it, as well.

**Source:** Tom McIntyre, *The Behavior Survival Guide for Kids: How to Make Good Choices and Stay Out of Trouble*, ISBN: 1-57542-132-1 (Free Spirit Publishing, 1-800-735-7323, www.freespirit.com).

Discipline Tips

### Teach students ABCs of conflict resolution

- a. **\_\_\_\_\_** “He did it on purpose!”
- b. **\_\_\_\_\_** Many classroom fights
- c. **\_\_\_\_\_** start when one student attributes a malicious intent to another student’s behavior. What if students could reserve judgment?

Here’s how the ABCs can help:

- A Adversity.** Something bad happens—for example, student #1 knocks a book off student #2’s desk.
  - B Belief.** Student #2 decides why the action took place: “He did it on purpose—just to bug me.”
  - C Consequence.** Student #2 reacts: “I’ll get even with him.”
- Teach students that they can’t change A. But B and C are under

their control. How would they feel if they knew that the student had slipped on a wet spot on the floor and bumped into the desk by accident? Then the consequence would probably be much more relaxed. “It was an accident.”

In class meetings and at teachable moments, help students change their beliefs. Ask questions like, “Why else could that have happened?” Once they change their beliefs, they are also likely to change their subsequent actions.

**Source:** Carol Cummings, *Winning Strategies for Classroom Management*, ISBN: 0-87120-381-2 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).