

Better Teaching[®]

Classroom Ideas to Improve Student Achievement **Elementary** EDITION

Wilderness Trail Educational Cooperative



Getty Images

Connecting With Students

Create the happiest place to learn



Now that it's April, you and your students are probably in the throes of preparing for end-of-year examinations. Sometimes this doesn't leave much time for those lighthearted moments that make teaching and learning enjoyable.

April is also National Humor Month—founded in 1976 by Larry Wilde, a humorist and executive director of the Carmel Institute of Humor.

Celebrate National Humor Month in your classroom with the following ideas:

- **Riddle of the Day.** Create a month-long routine that will give students a chuckle to look forward to as soon as they step into the classroom. Draw a laughing face on your chalkboard. Include a dialogue bubble. Each day, fill in the bubble with a riddle for the class to solve.
- **Month of Laughter.** Assign each student to read one funny book this month. Ask your librarian for a list.

Have students illustrate “the funniest moment” from the book. Post the illustrations around the classroom.

- **Word Wall of Humor.** *Funny* is a common word. Ask students to find synonyms—for example, *humorous, amusing, absurd, comical, jocular*. Have students add to the list from words in their readings. Encourage daily use of each new word.
- **Comic Strip Sequence.** Divide the class into groups of three or four. Choose a simple comic strip (with three or four frames) for each group. Cut up the strip and give each group member one frame with speech bubbles erased. Have students make up the dialogue in each of their bubbles. Then arrange the pieces in logical sequence. Have fun reading the new dialogues.

Source: Steve Wilson, “Classroom Tools,” National Humor Month, www.humormonth.com/48-Action-projects-plus-NHM-2.pdf.

Keeping Students on Task

Teach students to follow four rules for smooth transitions



Could you use extra teaching time each day? You may be able to find it by decreasing the time it takes for students to move from one activity to another.

Think about the transitions students make in your classroom. Do they arrive and immediately settle down to work? Do they line up quickly and quietly for classes like music and PE? How long do they take to settle down after lunch and recess?

To make transition times as smooth as possible, teach these four rules. Tell students to:

1. **Move quickly and quietly.** You might try timing students to see if they can line up for lunch in less time than it took them yesterday.
2. **Put materials away,** then get out what they will need for their next class or activity. This may mean setting aside a little time each week to have students clean out their desks so they can find their math or spelling books more easily.
3. **Carry their chairs with them,** when necessary, as they move to the next activity.
4. **Keep hands and feet** to themselves. You need to be prepared as well. At the start of the day, be sure you have organized all the materials you will need to teach each lesson.

Source: Bob Algozzine et al., *Strategies and Tactics for Effective Instruction*, ISBN: 1-5703-5119-8 (Sopris West, 1-800-547-6747, www.sopriswest.com).

IN THIS ISSUE: Motivate students with word puzzles, page 2 • Involve parents when dealing with bullying, page 3 • Expect higher-level thinking, page 4

Motivating Students

Motivate students with word puzzles



Most youngsters love working on puzzles. You can use that “puzzle appeal” to add a twist to any assignment. Challenge your students to create their own puzzles.

For example, after students have read an assigned book:

1. **Pass out sheets of graph paper** and challenge students to create a word-search puzzle.
2. **Tell students to include:**
 - ♦ Title.
 - ♦ Author.
 - ♦ Main characters.
 - ♦ Setting.
 - ♦ Words that describe key events in the book.
3. **Have students exchange** the puzzles with classmates and then solve them.

Consider laminating the puzzles so students can exchange them again and again with different classmates. You will also be able to keep them from year to year.

The puzzles make great free-choice activities. They can even motivate students to read new books! You can also use this activity for chapter reviews.

Source: Gary Hopkins, “25 Ideas to Motivate Young Readers,” *Education World*, www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson035.shtml.

Working With Groups: Part Four of a Four-Part Series

Complement group work with ‘literature circles’



Consider adding “literature circles” to your traditional reading group methods. This gives students a chance to work with those of different abilities but with whom they share common interests. It may also give many a positive perspective on being placed in a “reading group.”

Literature circles differ from traditional groups in several important ways:

- **Literature circles** include students with common interests—historical fiction or mysteries, for example. Students may have a wide range of reading abilities.
- **Traditional groups** include students of similar reading abilities. Interests may or may not be a factor.
- **Literature circles** allow students to choose the book that the circle will read—usually from among a list of texts already approved by the teacher.

Traditional groups usually read texts chosen by the teacher based on student ability.

- **Literature circles** are heterogeneous and the chosen book may well be above the reading level of some students in the group. The teacher may have to act as reader for some of the students in the circle.

Traditional groups usually read a text that all students can handle, even if improving fluency and comprehension is an ongoing concern.

- **Literature circles** allow the teacher to participate by questioning students and modeling ways to share impressions and connections about the book.

Traditional groups often focus on teaching certain strategies.

Source: Barbara A. Lehman, *Children’s Literature and Learning: Literary Study Across the Curriculum*, ISBN: 978-0-8077-4823-7 (Teachers College Press, 1-800-575-6566, www.tcpress.com).

Listening & Following Directions

Give your students tips on how to LISTEN



Most of your instruction probably requires students to listen. But many young students may not know how. Here are guidelines on teaching students how to LISTEN. Tell students to:

- L Look at the speaker.** It may be hard for your students to believe this, but explain to them that they “listen” with their eyes as well as their ears.
- I Intently focus.** Today’s students are multi-taskers. But they need to learn to place other tasks “on hold” and pay close attention when they are listening to something important.
- S Sit up.** It’s easy for students to let their attention wander if they’re

slumping in their chair. Together, make a list of the ways people do (or do not) show someone they are listening.

- T Take notes or draw pictures.** When students are actively involved, they are more likely to remember what they hear.
- E Echo what was learned.** After hearing something, a student should be able to restate the key ideas in his own words.
- N New learning.** Help students connect what they are learning to what they already know.

Source: Barbara R. Blackburn, *Classroom Instruction From A to Z*, ISBN: 9781-5966-7038-9 (Eye on Education, 1-888-299-5350, www.eyeoneducation.com).

Classroom Management

Increase retention with the '10 to 2' rule



Students usually make sense of new learning by integrating it into what they already know.

But it takes time for them to do that. So learners take mental breaks. The problem for you as a teacher is that students may take these breaks even when you're still teaching!

While students are trying to figure out a key concept, they may stop to mull it over. Meanwhile, you've already moved on, and the students have missed your next point. As a result, they can become overwhelmed by the amount of new material and may simply check out. So what's the solution?

One way to reduce information loss is to schedule breaks using the

"10 to 2" rule. Following about 10 minutes of giving students new information, plan a two-minute break so they can process what they have just learned.

During break time, you might:

- **Ask students** to talk about a key idea with a partner.
- **Ask a question** that students can discuss in a small group.
- **Have students jot down** the most important thing they just learned.

The "10 to 2" rule will help more students master the material the first time you teach it. In the long run, you'll save time by planning lessons with short breaks.

Source: Paula Rutherford, *Instruction for All Students*, ISBN: 9780-9777-7968-0 (Just ASK Publications, 1-800-940-5434, www.justaskpublications.com).

Resources



Standardized testing is a reality. *Teaching Strategies That Prepare Students for High-Stakes Tests* moves beyond the "teach to the test" mentality. Donna Walker Tileston and Sandra K. Darling show how to break down state standards into manageable parts, identify key elements in state tests and select teaching approaches based on the latest research. (ISBN: 9781-4129-4976-7, Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com.)



Looking for a fun way to teach place value? Fractions? Order of operations? Visit Math Cats (www.mathcats.com). Created by fourth-grade teacher Wendy Petti, Math Cats is a collection of fun ways for students to explore math concepts. It includes math games, math crafts and Animal Math in the News. In the educators' corner, teachers share ideas on ways to teach math concepts.



Flash cards work whether students are learning math facts or new vocabulary. Create a deck with states and their capitals. Identify dates and major historical events. Study multiplication, division or equivalent fractions. The web-based program at <http://teacher.scholastic.com/tools/flashcards.htm> will make it easy for you to create flash cards—or for students to make their own.

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.

Keeping Classrooms Safe

Involve parents when dealing with bullying



Solving a bullying problem in your classroom usually means involving the parents. Here are tips for speaking with the parents of both bullies and victims.

When working with the parents of the *bully*:

- **Don't blame the parents** of the bully. Even the "best" parents have children who sometimes make bad decisions. So start with the premise that you and the parents are on the same side.
- **Don't make light** of the student's behavior. Let parents know that bullying is against school rules and that you need their help in ending this behavior.
- **Work together** to develop a list of consequences that you—and the parents—will use.

- **Develop a communication** method so the parents can be aware of their child's behavior each day.

When working with parents of the *victim*:

- **Let parents know** their child is not alone. Share the school's anti-bullying policy. Let parents know you plan to take action.
- **Do not share** with the victim's parents the *exact* action you will take with the bully. That student also has privacy rights.
- **Provide a chance** for the victim to talk with you each day to report on how things are going.
- **Stay in touch.**

Source: Allan L. Beane, *Protecting Your Child From Bullying*, ISBN: 9780-7879-9517-1 (Jossey-Bass, a division of John Wiley & Sons, 1-877-762-2974, www.josseybass.com).

Focus Thinking Skills

Learning to Infer

Use pictures to make inferences



Making inferences, or “reading between the lines,” is a key comprehension skill that elementary students are just beginning to learn. The use of pictures can be tremendously helpful. Consider this method:

1. **Find a picture** from a text or age-appropriate novel that your students can identify—but which also has several elements that are open to question. For example, if an animal is in the picture, they may wonder: Why is the animal there? Where does this take place?
2. **Help students create** a three-section chart:
 - ◆ Picture Clues
 - ◆ What I Already Know
 - ◆ What I Have Figured Out
3. **Have students look** at the picture and then work backwards.
 - ◆ What have they figured out from the picture?
 - ◆ What did they already know that lead them to this conclusion?
 - ◆ What picture clues lead them to this conclusion?

Some students will do this on their own. Others will need significant scaffolding from you to talk through why they can “just tell” what their inference is about the picture.

Source: Divonna M. Stebick and Joy M. Dain, *Comprehension Strategies for Your K–6 Literacy Classroom*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-4043-6 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Setting High Expectations

Expect higher-level thinking



Give students the easy way out—and many will take it. They may even get good grades, but they won’t progress much beyond reciting facts. Students need to understand that knowing facts is important, but it’s only the first step.

To illustrate this concept:

- **Draw a house.** To illustrate Oliver Wendell Holmes’ “three-story intellect,” draw a picture of a large three-story house. Tell students: Just knowing facts keeps you on the first floor. Comparing the facts to what you already know moves you to the second floor. Forming ideas and making predictions gets you to the top.
- **Beef up your questions.** Let students know that you will ask them “big, round” questions—the kind that require them to attempt to

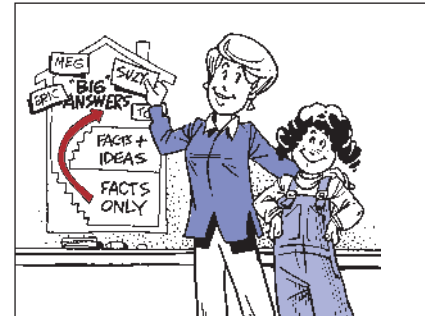


Illustration by Bob George

explain their answers. Questions that can be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*, or with just a couple of words, are “skinny, flat” questions. This idea is also a good candidate for illustration on the blackboard or a poster.

Source: Brian M. Pete and Robin J. Fogarty, *Close the Achievement Gap: Simple Strategies That Work*, ISBN: 0-9747416-5-5 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Learning Thinking Skills

Sharpen questioning skills in a FLASH



You know that for full comprehension to take place, students must question, connect with and form ideas about their reading. Show students how to do it in a FLASH.

First developed for use with students who have disabilities, this method can be used or modified for use with any student. Ask students to:

- F Focus.** What is the subject? Or, what is happening in the story?
- L Look.** Can you find something that you already knew?
- A Activate.** Use what you already know to come up with some

questions that will make you think (similar to the KWL method—what I Know, what I Want to know, what I Learned).

- S See.** What connections or relationships do you see between new material in this reading and other material you have already learned or read?
- H Hypothesize.** What ideas do you have after reading? Can you make any predictions after reading this material?

Source: John Barell, *Why Are School Buses Always Yellow? Teaching for Inquiry, PreK–5*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-5733-5 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).