

Better Teaching[®]

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

Wilderness Trail Educational Cooperative



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Bringing Lessons to Life

Physical fitness brings life to lessons



Obesity in young children is on the rise. Some students in your classroom may fall into this category. While you can't take charge of the lifestyles of all your students, you *can* do plenty to set a good example.

May is Physical Fitness Month and offers an ideal opportunity to try some of these ideas:

- **Encourage students to sign up** for the President's Challenge (www.presidentschallenge.org/home_kids.aspx). Consider offering extra credit or a few bonus points for students who complete activities and bring in their charts to show you.
- **Work with your colleagues** who teach gym. Ask what you can do in your classroom to complement what they are doing in P.E. They will likely have some good ideas for you. Also ask for a list of ideas to send to parents to get their children active and moving at home.

- **Pledge to your students** that you won't spend recess sitting in the shade talking to colleagues—the entire month of May!
- **Lead your class in outdoor games.** Sponsor and participate in a jump-rope contest. Wear comfortable clothes and try the slide or swings. Your students won't forget it!
- **Create an "Our Active Class"** bulletin board. Ask students to bring in pictures from home, showing them participating in sports or doing something active with their families. Take photos of your students during gym class and at recess to add to the board.
- **"Take Five" every day this month** with a whole-class break to stretch or even do a few jumping jacks. Do it twice a day if you can.

Source: "PCPFS National Physical Fitness and Sports ('May Month') Toolkit," The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, www.fitness.gov/May%20Month/may_month_toolkit.htm.

Differentiating Instruction

Show your students how to deal with not being 'the best'



When you differentiate your instructions, you may encounter an unusual problem. Suddenly, bright students who have always been "the best" (without much effort) now find they have to work harder than they used to.

Learning how to meet academic challenges will be good for these students in the long run. But in the short run, here are some ways you can help them deal with this challenge:

- **Stress that their self-worth** does not have to be tied up in getting a perfect score. Say things like, "It must feel good to know that you learned something new."
- **Focus on progress**, not perfection. Ask, "What did you learn while you were doing this? What will you do differently next time?"
- **Read biographies** of high achievers. Point out how practice and persistence paid off.
- **Help students find enjoyment.** Ask them to tell you the part of the assignment they liked best.
- **Break down big tasks** into small ones. Students who have never had to work hard may have real issues with time management.
- **Teach students:** "I may not always *be* the best, but I can always *do* my best."

Source: Joan F. Smutny, *Acceleration for Gifted Learners, K-5*, ISBN: 9781-4129-2567-9 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Building Responsibility

Turn your students into list makers

a. — How many times have you forgotten to do something because you failed to write it down? This is a common problem and affects almost everyone at times.

Appointments that are written down are simply easier to remember—and to keep. Goals, too, are more likely to be achieved if they are written down.

Here's how you can help cement this simple principle in your students. Make this part of your daily class routine:

- **Have your students** create a checklist for seatwork. As they complete each item on the list, they should cross it off.
- **Tell students to make a list** of everything they need to take home each afternoon. Even if they remember their homework, items such as musical instruments often get overlooked, and field trip permission forms don't make it into the backpacks.
- **Encourage your students** to make "bring to school" lists at home, too.

Source: Peg Dawson and Richard Guare, *Smart But Scattered*, ISBN: 9781-5938-5445-4 (Guilford Press, 1-800-356-7006, www.guilford.com).

Surviving the First Year: Part One of a Three-Part Series

Prepare a 'game plan' for student field trips



The return of warmer weather usually makes students and faculty eager to get out of doors. It's field-trip season and, to a new teacher, that prospect can be both exciting and daunting. An advance plan will help calm your nerves and create the best possible experience for everyone.

Here are some tips:

- **Ask for help.** You may need more help than just school faculty to chaperone field trips. Ask for parent volunteers. Parents and guardians often like to join their children if they can arrange their schedules, so send out requests at least two weeks before the trip. Call, write or email with reminders and details. Be sure to thank parents for participating.
- **Check paperwork.** As a general rule, students cannot attend field trips without written permission from a parent or guardian. At least

one week before the trip, review your permission slips and make sure each student has turned in a signed slip. If not, contact parents or guardians to explain the permission requirement and offer to send home a replacement slip, if needed.

- **Research the location.** You'll want to be prepared to point out items of interest to students.
- **Practice with the class.** Be clear and specific with students about your expectations for their behavior. Also discuss the purpose of the trip and what you hope students will learn.
- **Monitor.** Keep a list of which adults are responsible for which students. Check in often to make sure all students are accounted for.
- **Have fun!**

Source: Jim Burke, *The Teacher's Essential Guide Series: Classroom Management*, ISBN: 0-439-93446-X (Scholastic, 1-800-246-2986, www.scholastic.com).

Homework

It's time to take a new look at dioramas



Not all teachers use dioramas for homework. But there are some solid educational reasons to include them as a form of performance assessment:

- **A diorama allows you to see** at a glance whether students understood the content. If you ask students to talk with you about their dioramas, you can quickly check how much they have learned about the subject.

For example, a student who is creating a diorama of an animal should be able to illustrate the environment in which the animal lives. A nocturnal animal should not be shown in a scene with the sun in the sky!

- **A diorama allows you to ask** questions about each detail. One teacher asked a student, "What are those brown dots of paint in your diorama of the Mexican free-tailed bat?" The student's answer: "Bats eat mosquitoes!"

Students no longer need to create dioramas in old shoe boxes. Visit <http://gallimorelearning.blogspot.com/2006/12/diorama-foldables-part-3.html> for a web-based demonstration of how to create a diorama out of a piece of construction paper.

Source: Douglas Fisher, *Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom*, ISBN: 9781-4166-0569-0 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

Discipline

Find ways to head off power struggles



Power struggles can wear you out. There are times when a student wants his way and is willing to hold out until he gets it.

You may start out by ignoring the behavior. It continues. You may try arguing or yelling. But the student just keeps on doing what he's doing. Eventually, you give in.

Unfortunately, you have just taught that student an important lesson: He can hold out longer than you can. So he's likely to try it again—and again.

What can you do to head off a power struggle? Here are some tips:

- **Delay.** Say, "I can see you're upset. I am, too. We can talk about this at three o'clock this

afternoon or first thing tomorrow." You've stayed in control, but you have offered the student some time to cool off.

- **Offer positive choices.** Teachers sometimes offer a choice that sounds like this: "Take it or leave it." Instead, offer the choice in a positive way. "You can do your math or read the story. Which would you prefer to do first?"
- **Change the subject.** One teacher burst into song when she was in a power struggle. The students thought she was crazy—but they usually laughed and went along.

Source: MaryIn Applebaum, *How to Handle the Hard-to-Handle Student, K-5*, ISBN: 9781-4129-6439-5 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Connecting With Parents

Help parents prepare for conferences



Most parents have questions they want to ask during a parent-teacher conference. But sometimes the time runs out before they have a chance to ask them. Many teachers have found that sending home a list of potential questions is a good way to help parents prepare for their year-end conference.

In your conference invitation, indicate the general topics you are likely to discuss. Then invite parents to come to the conference with their own questions. You might even leave space on your conference invitation for parents to jot down their thoughts and questions.

Here are some of the questions you might suggest:

- **How would you rate** my child's progress this year?

- **What do the state tests show** about my child's progress? Is my child meeting the standards set for this grade in math, reading, and other subjects?
- **What is my child's general** behavior in the class?
- **How well does my child** get along with other students in the class?
- **What are some things** my child has done well this year?
- **In what areas** could my child improve?
- **What are some things** I can do at home between now and when school starts next year to help prepare my child for the next grade?

Source: George E. Pawlas, *The Administrator's Guide to School-Community Relations*, ISBN: 1-596-67005-3 (Eye on Education, 1-888-299-5350, www.eyeeoneducation.com).

Resources



Jack Prelutsky is the nation's first Children's Poet Laureate.

In a new book, he shows children how they can write their own poems. *Pizza, Pigs, and Poetry: How to Write a Poem* includes many of his own poems, along with comments on how he came to write them. The short book includes tips, advice and exercises that will get children started writing their own poems. (ISBN: 0-0614-3448-5, HarperCollins Children's Books, 212-261-6500, www.harpercollinschildrens.com.)



Kids love mysteries. *One Minute Mysteries: 65 Short Mysteries You Solve with Science* lets students tap into their knowledge of science to solve the mysteries. Each story lasts just a minute. Written by Eric Yoder and his daughter Natalie, this book provides great science lessons, sponge activities and brain teasers. (ISBN: 9780-9678-0201-5, Science Naturally, 1-866-724-9876, <http://sciencenaturally.com>.)



How do you say *thank you* in American Sign Language (ASL)? What's a word for *math*? If you have a hearing-impaired student in your class, the HandSpeak online dictionary (www.handspeak.com) is a great resource. It includes a dictionary, ASL grammar, a manual alphabet for finger spelling and the signs for numerals.

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 : Motivating Students

Overcoming Apathy

Add interest with fun 'mystery bags'



Drilling with flash cards is a tried-and-true method for mastering basic facts. Whether you're helping students learn math facts, definitions, spelling words or states and capitals, you have probably given them a pack of flash cards and told them to practice with a partner.

Effective? Absolutely. But it isn't much fun. "Mystery bags" can turn flash-card drills into a fun lesson. Here's how:

1. **Save gift bags.** Everyone gets them, and no one likes to throw them away.
2. **Make "mystery bags"** by gluing a large question mark on the front of each bag.
3. **Create sets of flash cards** and drop them into the bags. (You can put the same flash cards in each bag, or bags can hold cards with different information.)
4. **Place the bags around** the room and tell students to go sit by a bag of their choice.
5. **Have students select cards** and practice drilling each other.
6. **Tell students to trade bags** if bags hold different cards. (You might set a timer.)

Store mystery bags around the classroom. Students can use them when they finish seat work or during free-choice time.

Source: Richard Allen, *Green Light Classrooms: Teaching Techniques That Accelerate Learning*, ISBN: 9781-4129-5610-9 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Positive Thinking

Boost morale of 'average' students



Take a moment and think about the students in your class. Chances are, the first images to pop into your head will be of your "exceptional" students: the student whose work and answers in class never failed to impress you; and the student whose parents you had to phone every other day to discuss an inappropriate attitude or behavior.

But what about the students who came to class, behaved appropriately and displayed academic performance expected for their age and grade level.

Make this month about them. As they head into summer, let them know how much you valued them this year. Here are some ideas:

- **Call or email their parents.** You'll find that you enjoy calling parents to say, "I'm so glad your child was in my class this year."



Illustration by Bob George

- **Write notes to your students.** "Jesse, you always try hard and turn in the best possible work. Thanks for being in my class." This may be the first recognition Jesse, your "average" student, has ever gotten. It will mean the world to him.

Source: Renee Roseblum-Lowden with Felicia Lowden Kimmel, *You Have to Go to School ... You're The Teacher!* ISBN: 978-1-4129-5122-7 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Learning From Mistakes

Be a mentor, provide encouragement



Students can become discouraged and apathetic after a setback. As their teacher, let them know that making mistakes is a big part of learning.

As their mentor, let students know that you don't expect them to be perfect, and they can always turn to you for help and guidance.

To inspire self-confidence and help students learn from mistakes:

- **Tell them not to agonize** over past mistakes. Stress new beginnings and move forward.
- **Help students avoid** repeating mistakes. Teach them to set small goals—and ways to

achieve those goals. "I will get all my vocabulary words right this week. I will study them 15 minutes every night."

- **Track progress together.** Celebrate milestones, no matter how small.
- **Speak encouraging words.** "I liked seeing you try" "You figured it out—I knew you could!" "You've been working very hard. You should feel proud. Your extra effort paid off!"

Source: Judith Allen Brough et al., *Teach Me! Dare You!* ISBN: 1-59667-018-5 (Eye on Education, 1-888-299-5350, www.eyeoneducation.com).