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Ten Strategies for Creating a Classroom Culture of High Expectations

SITE DEVELOPMENT GUIDE #13

Introduction

To help students meet rigorous course standards in academic and career/technical classrooms, each teacher must establish and maintain a learning environment that supports and motivates students to do their personal best. Classroom management is so much more than a set of appropriate rules and consequences. There is a skill set of strategies that teachers and principals can use to create focused and productive classrooms that help students achieve higher levels of performance. Principals and teachers can implement self-assessment and staff development programs built around the following 10 strategies.

Strategy One

Help all teachers develop, communicate and implement classroom motivation and management plans.

Productive student behavior and smooth day-to-day operation of the classroom does not happen by accident. Teachers, preferably working in teams, can develop written classroom motivation and management plans. These plans are communicated in writing to parents and students, explained orally and posted in classrooms permanently. Effective teachers revisit the plans several times during the year to evaluate with students how the plans are working and make any adjustments necessary for teachers and students to be more productive and focused.

Components of a classroom motivation and management plan:

- *Instructional goals and outcomes*

Teaching and learning are the first topics communicated to students. A course outline that addresses content and assignments is given to students and parents so they can see what students are expected to master in the course. This outline can be a yearlong plan or it can be separated into grading periods and disseminated throughout the year. Letting students in on the plan establishes the expectation that there is much to be accomplished and that students are active partners in learning.

- *Classroom policies, rules and procedures*

Assuming that students can guess what teachers expect from them does not promote effective classroom practices. Communicating to students expectations for daily operating procedures — orally and in writing — by posting them permanently in the classroom and also by sending copies to parents, sends a clear message to all parties about the business of learning. Savvy teachers engage students in the development of these expectations and use the process as a teaching and learning experience. Expectations are stated positively and clearly. (*Policies* are a statement of school-wide expectations; *rules* are few and never changing; and *procedures* are uniquely the teacher's preferences about what constitutes business as usual in the classroom.)

- *Expectations for student performance and behavior*

This part of the plan allows the teacher to define a student's personal best in terms of academic performance and citizenship within the classroom. This is a good place to include positive tips for appropriate social, study, team management, literacy and organizational skills.

- *Consequences and rewards*

This part of the plan outlines what happens when students fulfill their responsibilities and what happens when they repeatedly violate classroom procedures and policies.

- *Opportunities for extra help*

A good classroom motivation and management plan has a recurring theme of high expectations for students doing their personal best at all times. This theme is balanced with the clear message that the teacher is willing to assist each student to master challenging assignments and to develop more productive learning habits. The plan will outline when, where and how extra help can be obtained and what the student must do to get it.

- *Communication plan*

In the plan, students and parents learn how they can communicate with the teacher and how the teacher will regularly communicate with them throughout the year. The teacher communicates that student achievement is a team effort involving the student, the teacher and the parent. It is important that parents and students feel that genuine three-way communication is wanted, expected and necessary. E-mail and real-time online communication methods have opened new avenues for students and parents seeking help and asking questions. A list of specific times, phone numbers and e-mail address(es) is needed.

Strategy Two

Develop instructional plans that facilitate bell-to-bell teaching.

Maximizing the limited time teachers have with students and communicating high expectations for on-task behavior are the dual goals of this strategy. Engaging students in meaningful activities from the first minute of class and continuing to engage them until one minute before class concludes are critical. Essential techniques for achieving full student engagement regardless of the length of the class period include

- greeting students at the door;
- posting sponge activities for students to begin immediately;
- having materials needed by students and teachers readily available;
- planning for smooth transitions between instructional activities;
- building into instructional activities opportunities for movement and active student engagement;
- checking regularly for student understanding and focus; and
- having an active summary activity in every learning segment.

Generally speaking, if teachers plan for four learning segments of about the same length during a class period, the pace of class time will be energetic and effective. The four learning segments are

- presenting and linking the day's objective to previous learning or homework;
- teacher-directed instruction to clarify or introduce new material;
- student-centered learning activities (with accountability) requiring active student engagement; and
- summary-reflective dialogue to check for mastery and establish links with future learning or homework.

Strategy Three

Create classroom organization and arrangement that spurs productivity.

The physical appearance and strategic location of furnishings, materials and equipment do make a difference in classroom management, student productivity and teacher effectiveness. The worst arrangement is the traditional “teacher desk up front facing rows of student desks” model. Unfortunately, most classrooms look like this. Motivation, wellness and attitudes are favorably impacted by color, personalized space and face-to-face engagement. **Colorful classrooms with displays of good student work, some “creature comforts” and age-appropriate displays encourage learning. Seating arrangements that enable occupants to see the faces of the people speaking are judged more pleasant by teachers and students.** These factors do, in fact, create more productive environments. U-shaped configurations allow teachers to circulate into the space of learners — or distracters — with just a few steps and enable students to see each other and teachers better.

Storing materials at pick-up points easily accessible to students cuts down on wasted time. Establishing a routine place to drop off homework and pick up graded papers or writing journals, having several trash cans in different corners of the room, and not having the teacher's desk as a focal point of the room minimize distractions, motion and clutter. Evaluating the classroom space in this way determines whether it is inviting or not. Is it colorful, soothing, neat and focused on inspiring quality student work? Does it diminish noise and confusion or the opportunity for students to hide and opt out of active engagement?

When students are engaged in individual activities such as sponge activities, silent reading, tests and self-practice, the use of low-volume background music is comforting. An audio cue can establish a norm of focus and quiet, and is a good way to keep these activities within strict time limits, thus communicating high expectations for completing tasks in a timely manner. A possible three-minute activity could be a three-minute taped song; a 12-minute activity, a 12-minute taped reading.

Strategy Four

Establish high expectations.

This strategy addresses academic expectations. The suggested practices answer the essential question, “What does it take for me to earn an A or B on this assignment or in this class?” Students will work harder if they have a grasp of the big picture and examples of the final product(s) they are expected to replicate. **All too often, we teach multitudes of “pieces parts,” never providing the student with a way to internalize how these parts fit together into a meaningful whole.**

Beginning with the end in mind means to plan and teach backward. Ways to establish high expectations include

- showing students samples of well thought-out solutions to mathematics problems, thus providing them with models of good solution methods;
- letting students listen to a recording of an orchestra playing a new piece of music before sight-reading the music for the first time;
- letting students watch a video of an operating four-stroke engine before teaching about the individual parts;
- letting students hear a well-written essay read aloud and review copies of it before having them write; and
- providing rubrics — or better yet, engaging students in the development of a rubric for an assignment.

Teachers must never accept F work! The formative grading norm of A, B, C and NY (Not Yet!) communicates volumes about what is expected from students and stresses how important it is for them to learn everything that is taught.

Warning! Engaging students in learning trivia, things they already know or things that they will not use immediately wastes precious teaching time. Students do not appreciate wasting their time in this way any more than educators appreciate wasting their time in staff development that is not relevant, meaningful or has already been mastered.

Strategy Five

Communicate expectations to student and parents.

This is not the same as communicating the plan as outlined in Strategy One. This strategy describes how students and parents are active partners in the responsibility for producing quality work. How do we communicate exactly how students are doing and what they need to do to produce higher quality work? **Given computer-assisted management of grading, daily record keeping and communication, it is possible to personally communicate with students and parents at least weekly.** No one likes surprises when it comes to less than acceptable performance.

Effective teachers produce and share progress reports and grades weekly with parents and students. **Instead of admonishing parents *not* to help students with out-of-class work, effective teachers expect parents to help by proofreading, checking student work and tutoring difficult content when possible.** This, balanced with sufficient in-class supervision and assessment of what students can produce independently, reaffirms the team approach to learning and alleviates the surprise or “gottcha” factor associated with the totally-teacher-owned assessment of how students are performing. Writing personal notes on specific areas of student performance, requiring parent participation and sharing expectations in advance clearly communicate high expectations to all parties and allow them to participate in the satisfaction of a job well done.

Strategy Six

The student as worker — implement instructional activities that actively engage students.

The best motivational tool for students is personal involvement in something that produces a clear result and is interesting to them. This is why students spend hours on video games, skateboarding or playing sports — even those requiring thinking, risk and perhaps personal injury. Learning *can* be interesting and *can* produce a clear, positive result.

Unfortunately, instructional planners sometimes ignore this reality or intentionally plan for the majority of the student’s classroom time to be passive with the teacher in control and onstage. This is boring and hypocritical. The student is held accountable for performance and yet has few opportunities to *perform*. The direct relationship between what is done in class and what is expected on the test is at best vague to students — and at worst, resented by them. Ask them — they will affirm this. A desirable ratio of teacher-talk time to student-talk time is one to three. **Letting a class day end without actively engaging each student in producing some thought, paper or product of his/her own should be avoided at all times.** This does not mean copying the teacher’s notes from overhead transparencies. Teachers must ask thoughtful questions, require students to think, listen to students, value questions more than answers, and demonstrate that they value thinking more than talking. These are ways to insist that every student be engaged.

There are many good ways to keep students actively engaged, including:

- planning for and expecting writing of more than one page each week;
- reading with and to students;
- using reading as the primary homework activity;
- using a variety of written and reading sources for every unit of instruction; and
- using cooperative and project-based learning that requires students to develop group process, time management, planning and communication skills along with content mastery.

Strategy Seven

Keep students on target.

There are two teacher behaviors that have a positive impact on student achievement — quality homework assignments and insistence on quality student work. We often hear complaints that students will not do homework and that they “just don’t seem to care about quality.” A closer look at classroom practices and instructional behaviors give clues to these perceived dilemmas. Student interviews give us even more insight. **Students will choose to do those things that they deem of interest to them and have definite value.**

Quality homework assignments facilitate the learning necessary to attain required knowledge. “Skill, drill and overkill” practice is not interesting and can, in fact, be harmful to learning. Homework that requires time or resources students do not have at hand is doomed from the start. Homework is not homework if it is completed in class. **The best homework activity is based on reading that the teacher uses to build the next lesson.** This enables students to see a clear relationship between what they are asked to do outside class and their opportunities to be successful in class.

Homework tied to graded sponge activities can be productive. Options in homework activities — reading, taking notes, outlining, developing questions about the main points in the reading, finding one example of, using common elements found at home to illustrate, writing — allow students to personalize homework. Short activities (four problems instead of 40) are just as productive as lengthy homework assignments — and are appreciated by families. Asking parents to review homework and sign it before submission is also effective.

Students, like all people, tend to do what is expected of them — especially if they are not let off the hook. If teachers assign homework but do not review it or use it, students will stop doing it. **If teachers accept poor quality work, students will perpetually slap something on paper just to have something to turn in. A smaller quantity of quality work is better than reams of mediocre work.**

Allowing and planning class time for students to proof and give feedback on the work of peers is one way to improve the quality of what teachers read and grade. In addition to showing students samples of quality work from outside the classroom, showing them quality student-generated work encourages confidence in producing this level of work. Writing with students and sharing teacher writing, reading with students and discussing teacher interpretation, and thinking out loud with students are ways to model thinking, reinforce positive efforts and increase the likelihood of quality work being produced.

Strategy Eight

Encourage frequent and relevant feedback that works.

Human nature requires positive feedback — especially when we are trying new things and taking risks. We all need safety nets and positive affirmation. **When positive steps are taken to engage students more actively in learning, it becomes the teacher’s role to provide feedback that guides students through new learning experiences.**

Teachers must use strategies to nurture their students through higher order thinking as they construct meaning and knowledge. Such strategies include

- beginning and ending every instructional segment with a review of past learning and the big picture;
- using good questioning feedback techniques to keep students focused and directed;
- inspiring students to probe “why?” and “how do you know that you know?”; and
- requiring students to express their thinking and learning through speaking, writing and designing new solutions.

Doing these things will result in higher student achievement and bolster students’ abilities to retain and apply information.

Finally, students need constant feedback on how well they are performing in relation to the standards that they are expected to master. This is referred to as “responding to the learner in terms of learning.” This habit not only focuses on what is important to learn, it offers an opportunity for teachers to praise even small steps and performances that approximate quality work — instead of habitually giving negative feedback on what is in error or not done correctly.

Feedback is a two-way proposition — students should be given opportunities to give feedback on the quality and effectiveness of assignments and how they would like to receive help, participate in the learning and help construct the learning process.

Strategy Nine

Establish grading practices that communicate high expectations and decrease frustration.

One of the most misused, misunderstood and mistrusted issues in public schooling is how we have communicated student achievement and progress to our publics. Grades must communicate to parents, students and teachers exactly what students know and are able to do. Grades must also communicate what quality work looks like. Therefore, we need to show students what good work is — whether in mathematics, music, English or auto mechanics. They need scoring guides that clearly delineate what the expectations are for earning top grades (As, Bs); acceptable grades (Cs); and Not Yet! (NY) for work that is not accepted.

Finally, the culture of assessment needs to reflect that every student is capable of — and expected to — produce acceptable work. Sub-standard work will not be accepted (Not Yet!) as final until it is at least minimally acceptable. This type of grading embraces the conviction that all students can and will learn. **It decreases frustration and shifts the responsibility for grades earned from the teacher’s red pen to the student’s choices and degree of effort.**

Strategy Ten

Deal with severe behavior.

Inevitably, even when all best practices are applied, there will be occasions when students exhibit behaviors that must be dealt with in some overtly proactive manner. “Talking the talk” and “walking the walk” require that any behavior that destroys an atmosphere of common decency and safety must be addressed — publicly and privately.

Some guidelines that will decrease the likelihood of inappropriate actions are

- having clearly defined policies;
- including stakeholders (parents, students and teachers) in the development of policies;
- communicating policies and consequences on a regular basis — once is not enough;
- being proactive — when there are actions that appear minor, but hold the potential of inciting more serious behaviors, act. For example, the wearing of clothing that communicates inclusion or exclusion, disrespectful language, graffiti, disrespectful gestures, malicious gossip, and inappropriate joking are all potential “hot boxes” that support bullying and anger;
- applying consequences — no matter who the violator is;
- remembering that imposing consequences for inappropriate behavior is intended to stop the undesirable activity and teach more constructive behavior — not destroy the offender; and
- building and maintaining close relationships with law enforcement agencies and utilizing their expertise when appropriate.

Finally, considering consequences that remove the student offender for the least amount of time from instruction preserves the student’s learning process. In-house alternative schools and Saturday work details for minor and moderately disruptive behaviors are good solutions. Including parents in the disciplining of repeat offenders and the development of behavior improvement plans is a must, as is meeting with ring leaders and influential students to let them know that their choices of behaviors are noticed and are of interest.

Conclusion

Motivation, instructional planning, parent engagement, teacher efficacy and consistency of high expectations are irrevocably intertwined. A climate that fosters and values respect, decency and success for EVERY student and staff member is what schools should strive for in their policies and practices.

Acknowledgements

This guide was developed by Myra Cloer Reynolds of SREB.

The publication is supported by funds from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education; the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation; The Goldman-Sachs Foundation; and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of any of the funding entities, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

