Practical Solutions for Classroom Management and Student Engagement

By Larry Ferlazzo & Friends

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Introduction: Collective Wisdom on Classroom Challenges

As teachers, the vast majority of us have no-shortage of items on our "to do" list, and often we feel swamped and barely able to keep our heads above water. In that kind of environment, many of us tend to be *reactive*—acting in less-than-thoughtful ways in response to challenges in our classroom—instead of being proactive, a word whose Greek roots mean "getting in front" of a situation.

Further, as time goes by, we may begin to get more comfortable with problems we're familiar with than with possible solutions. In fact, we can get so used to recurrent classroom problems we can forget that they are problems. One of the instructional strategies we use in 9th grade English classes at my school is a sequencing activity in which the text is cut into pieces and distributed for students to reassemble in the correct order. For two years, chaos reigned every time I did this lesson. Finally, a colleague suggested I give out the pieces one at a time and give students a few minutes to read and annotate them before passing out another piece. Instituting that simple procedure made all the difference in the world. But for two years I had thought chaos was just the way it was and the way it would always be.

My recognition that I needed to look at my classroom with "fresh eyes" is what prompted me to begin the "Classroom Q&A" blog on *Education Week Teacher*. The blog, in which I seek to explore questions about classroom challenges submitted by teacher-readers, also brought together several other concepts that had been on my mind. First and foremost was the idea, introduced to me by author Daniel Pink, that schools, companies, and public policymakers need to place a *higher-priority on "problem-finding"* instead of being entirely wrapped up in "problem-solving." All too often, we educators can be easily drawn to a *surface* problem and analysis that can lead to a less-than-ideal solution. For example, we say, "My students aren't motivated and I need ideas on how to motivate them." Instead, we might consider working from a more in-depth perspective, postulating something like, "Everyone is motivated by something, and I need to figure out what I can do to help my students connect that energy to what we are doing in class so they can motivate themselves." The former can lead to short-term solutions and the long-term damage of gold stars and extrinsic rewards, while the latter has a better chance of leading to life-long success. This kind of reframing can be the difference between pushing a rope and having people want to pull it on their own. It also reflects the experiences I gained during my 19-year career as a community organizer before I became a teacher.

So I thought that a blog devoted to finding problems might, in a small way, encourage educators (including myself) to reflect more deeply on their practice and find creative ways to improve.

But in addition to *problem-finding*, I felt like I might also be in an advantageous *problem-solving* position. Through my books, other blogs, and active presence in social media, I had come to know many educators throughout the world who collectively have a vast amount of experience in the classroom. I thought that I could contribute answers to some of the questions readers submitted to the blog, but—unlike some in the world of education—I knew that I was not going to feel comfortable offering detailed answers to problems that I knew little about. Instead, I could call upon my contacts, with their immense range of expertise, to contribute their own responses. After all, as Adam Grant, author of *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*, has

discovered, the most successful people in most professions are "givers," and I suspected there were few professions where that that truism was more pronounced than it was in education.

The "Classroom Q&A" blog quickly became popular, and more and more questions began to come in from teachers. They have run the gamut from classroom management to teaching science in an engaging way to education reform. I have definitely learned more than I have "taught" through the blog, and am very grateful to the educators who have contributed questions as well as to those who provided responses.

In an attempt to distill some of that collective wisdom into a practical resource for busy teachers, this e-book brings together the best posts from the blog related to classroom management and student engagement. These are the two most frequently asked about topics on the blog, and I believe that they are at the heart of effective instruction. The selected posts have been edited, and most include new information not included in the original posts. The responses from my expert contributors are reprinted by agreement.

I also want to note that all author royalties from this book will be contributed to the National Writing Project. The NWP is a nationwide network of educators working together to improve the teaching of writing in the nation's schools and in other settings. It has nearly 200 university-based sites, and develops the leadership and research needed for teachers to help students become successful writers and learners. Support from the NWP's California affiliate has made a tremendous difference in the quality of instruction at my school.

I hope you find this book helpful, and invite you to send your own questions to me at lferlazzo@epe.org for future posts, as well as contribute your responses to the "problems found" by others.

About the Author

Larry Ferlazzo teaches English, social studies and International Baccalaureate classes to English Language Learners and mainstream students at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

He's written five books: *Self-Driven Learning: Teaching Strategies For Student Motivation*; *The ESL/ELL Teacher's Survival Guide* (with Katie Hull-Sypnieski); *Helping Students Motivate Themselves: Practical Answers To Classroom Challenges*; *English Language Learners: Teaching Strategies That Work*; and *Building Parent Engagement In Schools* (with co-author Lorie Hammond).

Ferlazzo has won several awards, including the Leadership for a Changing World Award from the Ford Foundation, and he was the grand prize winner of the International Reading Association Award for Technology and Reading.

In addition to the Classroom Q&A blog at *Education Week Teacher*, he writes a popular education-resource blog and a regular column for *The New York Times*. His articles on education policy and classroom practice also regularly appear in *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*

and ASCD's *Educational Leadership*.

Ferlazzo was a community organizer for 19 years prior to becoming a public school teacher. He's married and has three children and two grandchildren.

Question 1: How can I get the new school year off to a good start?

As every good teacher knows, the first days of schools are crucial for establishing a supportive and safe classroom environment, a constructive pattern of behavior and expectations, and a positive basis to begin developing relationships. Handled well, the start of school can put you well on your way toward building "a community of learners" instead of a "classroom of students."

I try to emphasize five elements in my class during the whole year, but they are especially important during the first week of school:

1) **Building relationships:** Are you taking the time to build positive relationships with your students? As instructional expert Robert Marzano has written in the journal *Educational Leadership*:

Positive relationships between teachers and students are among the most commonly cited variables associated with effective instruction. If the relationship is strong, instructional strategies seem to be more effective. Conversely, a weak or negative relationship will mute or even negate the benefits of even the most effective instructional strategies.

You can find a list of useful relationship-building strategies on my resource blog, including the exceptional article that appeared in *Education Week Teacher*, *Five Practices for Building Positive Relationships With Students*, written by Kelley Clark.

2) **Setting and enforcing high expectations:** Are you setting and enforcing high expectations, along with being realistic in your outlook? Are you providing the necessary scaffolding so that students understand your expectations and have the tools to meet them? Some students may be coming to your classes after years of feeling like they've been labeled "slow" or of comfortably knowing how to "get by." It might take some time for students to become accustomed to high expectations, and some might need extra support to achieve them. However, if you take the time to build relationships so you can learn their interests, dreams, and hopes, you can help them see how having high expectations for themselves can be in their self-interest.

3) **Creating engaging lessons with the "why?" built in:** Are your lessons engaging students—right from the beginning—in higher-order thinking skills, and is it clear to them why it is in their self-interest to learn what is being taught? For example, one lesson that I use in the first week is designed to help students learn that the brain is like a muscle—that it gets stronger as we learn new things. Not only is the material engaging, the lesson also teaches my students that what a former student once told me is not true: "You're born as dumb or as smart as you're ever going to be." Negating that kind of thinking from the get-go creates a context for learning and developing potential.

4) **Using formative assessments:** Are you using formative assessments regularly, starting right away? At our school, we have students complete short cloze (fill-in-the-blank) passages and have students read to us for one minute at a time to roughly measure fluency. Not only do the

assessments give *us* a sense of where students are starting, they give *students a benchmark to* see how much progress they can make by working hard.

5) **Connecting with parents:** Are you connecting with your students' parents? Having a good relationship with parents of students has been shown in numerous studies to help boost student achievement. You can start it off by calling parents during the first week of school (or even before) to introduce yourself and share how excited you are to have their child in your class and to start the new year. This is also a great opportunity to ask about times when their child has been most excited about being in school.

Now you know my general philosophy. Let's see what some other educators have to say about making the most of those crucial early days of school.

Answer: A Balanced Approach

Response from Rick Wormeli, who is a well-known author, workshop leader, and educator. He is the author of Day One and Beyond.

First, learn your students' names. Do what you have to. Use memory tricks, place name tent cards on their desks, move students to different seats each day so name recall isn't just situational, practice in the hallways and cafeteria. But learn their names within the first week of school, and use them a lot. Incorporating their names daily is proof to students that they matter as individuals and that they are worth having their names remembered by respected adults. This creates an affinity that lasts the full year.

The first day of school is often swamped with forms, lists, seats, and procedures. In many schools, a teacher's first meeting with students is only 50 minutes or less, and there's little time to connect. So, instead of trying to cram all foundations and connections for future success into the first day, it makes more sense to focus on the first week or two of school to establish both elements.

In addition to using students' names early, there are a number of principles and practices for the first weeks of school that create student-teacher success throughout the year. Let me identify 10 of them:

1) **Set the academic expectations high:** Every day in the first week, even in the first meeting, teach something substantive in the curriculum. Make it something that is brand new, not something reviewed from the previous year. Students are hungry for intellectual engagement after a summer off, and they want to think great thoughts and do great works. They also want a clear sense of these new subjects, and they want to see your personal enthusiasm for it. Focusing on serious academics in these first hours of the year sets a clear expectation for students that they are capable, that this subject is worth the energy spent on it, and that their time will not be wasted in this classroom. Teach from the very first day.

2) **Create balance:** Mix academics with administrative and get-to-know-you activities. The balance should be about 50-50: half focused on engaging academics, half focused on forms, announcements, or activities meant to build classroom community. Keep the ratio: Students will grow impatient and disillusioned if too much time is spent on get-to-know-you activities. It sounds weird, but most students are not looking for continued summer camp experiences so much as they are seeking confidence and engagement.

3) **Provide a sense of belonging:** "Do I belong?" is one of the biggest concerns students have in almost every grade level. So give students proof every day that this is the right class and teacher for them. We can put elements on our classroom walls that reflect students' culture outside the school. We can use examples from their daily lives in our instruction. We can have them set up personal accounts on the school server, create stylized presentations, and participate in online communities in the first week. We can identify something specific in their statements that helps our learning in class rather than just nodding and thanking them for sharing. We can give students tasks that really matter, such as assisting in lesson delivery, doing P.A. announcements, operating technology, distributing supplies, participating in leadership/planning committees, building display areas, inviting guest speakers, preparing instructional materials, and leading new service projects.

4) **Read a daily poem:** Seriously, this works in all classes, not just English. It sets a positive tone, and it often stretches thinking for the class throughout the day. Keep each poem's length reasonable, topic meaningful, and expression enjoyable, or at least engaging. Yes, there are poems with great relevance to all subjects taught K-12, and if you can't find any, choose poems related to growing up or modern culture, or share the lyrics of powerful songs of any generation. For a typical year, you'll need about 180 poems, so start collecting them now! Several weeks into the year students will start bringing new ones to class themselves. It'll be that important to them.

5) **Tour the school:** Most schools provide this opportunity to incoming students during the week prior to the first day of school, but if not, we can take students on a tour of the building. It relieves anxiety, builds ownership, and opens students' minds to other possibilities: "Wow, I might want to take that class," "The library looks better than my old school library—maybe I'll go more often," or, "Guitars? Maybe I could learn to play one."

6) **Explain the schedule:** Students of all ages want to know the big picture, what is expected of them, and how not to look foolish. Remind them repeatedly of the class periods' start and stop times, passing time, and if you're on a block schedule, the larger picture of the schedule. Just because we post the schedule on the board during the first hour of the day doesn't mean students will remember it throughout the day or week.

7) **Share your grading and homework policies:** Remove anxiety early and be transparent with these policies from day one. You can place your policies in a quick-reference handout for students and parents to read and sign, but make sure you've had two or more colleagues, including an administrator, read through them first to make sure they can support them. This pre-printing review in addition to disseminating the policies the first week will prevent miscommunication down the road.

8) **Use the ELL mindset:** If your students are new to the school (9th graders entering high school or 6th graders entering middle school, for examples), it's helpful to think of them as English-language learners, new to the country, not speaking the language or knowing the customs. Try to empathize: What would we feel like if we were the ones that didn't understand the rules to the game that everyone around us knew and followed so well? We'd want someone to break everything down into explainable steps and give us the time and tools to take those steps. We'd want someone patient with our repeated questions, and someone who assured us that he or she knew we were intelligent despite our silly mistakes. Let's be that person with our students.

9) **Point out the opportunities, not just a litany of rules:** Instead of just listing rules and the consequences for breaking them, make sure you tell students what new opportunities and freedoms they now have. It's pretty disheartening to be so excited for a new journey only to face two or more hours of hearing about what you can't do. For every three rules/responsibilities declared, identify one new opportunity or invitation to try something new. Indicate there's hope here, not mere compliance.

10) **Show a sense of humor:** "Don't smile until Christmas" is one of the worst pieces of advice new teachers receive. Effective teachers know better. Students want to be assured that we are part of humanity and that they will be accepted for who they are, mistakes and all. Humor is a great way to build camaraderie—creating a sense that we're in this together, and we can relax when things get tough. Humor allows messages to get through minds encumbered by emotional angst. It makes us feel connected, and, when you get down to it, connection is what students crave in the first days of school. So let's laugh at ourselves in front of students, include a fun comic strip in a presentation, wear a silly hat or include a ridiculous prop for a portion of a lesson, or crack a pun or two during a lecture. It puts everyone in a good mindset for learning.

Instead of reading declarative statements from a policy manual for an hour, effective teachers use thoughtful practices over the course of the first weeks of school that not only sell students on their subjects, they also build students' capacities for learning and relating to one another. More importantly, they build hope. Good teachers realize that these are the most influential moments of the year for establishing mutual investment. Truly, we don't learn to swim by talking about swimming strokes and staring at the water. Make those first few weeks one big invitation: Come on in, the water's fine!

Answer: Create Structure

Response from Roxanna Elden, who is a National Board-certified teacher in Miami, Fla. Her book, [See Me After Class: Advice for Teachers by Teachers](#)*, is widely used for teacher training and retention.*

Here are some oft-overlooked basics to get you started on the right foot:

Plan for interruptions: Your main goal the first day is to set a serious tone so you can teach with minimum drama for the rest of the year. This can be harder than it sounds because teachers

often have to meet, greet, and seat existing students while new kids show up at the door and the P.A. system crackles with last-minute office requests. For this reason, the first day of class should be the most structured day of the year, not the most exciting. Your first-day lesson plan should be more like a checklist, and should include plenty of quiet activities that students can do at their desks without much help. One possibility is to have students make flash cards with their names, seat numbers, and one identifying detail so you can learn their names while they are working. You should also include a backup activity in case your lesson ends early. Take any steps you can to minimize first-day surprises. Any materials not in your room the Thursday before school starts won't be there on Monday—unless you put them there on Friday.

Plan for paper: You know your students will turn in plenty of papers once the year starts. What you may not realize is you'll also get lots of paperwork from your school early in the year—including some things you may not need to look at until May. Set up a box to file papers such as inventory lists that you don't need to fill out now but can't afford to lose. Otherwise, these can quickly turn into a tower on your desk that covers more urgent work. A detailed filing system is described in the "Piles and Files" chapter of my book, but you can start off on the right foot by having a clean file box and hanging folders ready to go inside it. You'll also want a box in your classroom closet that says "ideas for later," where you can put the binders, folders, and workbooks full of potentially awesome teaching ideas from professional-development sessions and colleagues. Then, be ready to turn your attention to grading students' work. Get at least two grades into your grade book the first week—and every week after that. Otherwise, ungraded papers can pile up and lead to a crisis when your first set of grades is due.

Plan for sleep: There can be a masochistic culture among young teachers regarding the number of hours put in "for the kids." After all, don't kids deserve someone who will work tirelessly to make sure they reach their full potential? Sure they do, but they also deserve a mentally healthy adult who wants to be in the room with them. A teacher sleeping three hours a night and making up for it with a double-dose of energy drinks is not that person. Work hard, but also set a reasonable bedtime for yourself and stick to it—"for the kids."

Answer: Be Positive

Response from Annette Breaux, who is an internationally-renowned author and speaker whose books include [101 Answers for New Teachers and Their Mentors](#).

My first piece of advice for getting the school year started well is *not* to listen to anyone who tells you, "Whatever you do, don't smile until Christmas!" That is some of the worst advice you will ever receive.

If the first (and daily) impression you make on your students is not a positive one, you're doomed to a miserable school year, and so are your students. The fact is that students need (and deserve) to be surrounded by positive adults. No student can possibly benefit from having another negative adult in his life. And none of us can ever have enough positive role models in our lives. So why is it that there are teachers in classrooms who do not appear happy? And how do you

think it would feel, as a student, to spend an entire school year in the classroom of someone who appears unhappy and serious most of the time? This is not to suggest that when a student behaves inappropriately you should act like you're happy about it. Use your common sense in this situation. The most effective teachers know how to appear serious while remaining calm and professional, but never personally offended. This is also not to suggest that if you appear happy, you'll be a great teacher. But all great teachers do have positive demeanors, so it's a vital ingredient to success in the classroom.

Remember that your attitude determines the "weather" in your classroom each day, as your own enthusiasm (or lack of) becomes your students'. Positive attitudes are contagious, and so are negative ones. The first thing students should see every day as they enter your classroom is your smiling face. The last thing they should see as they leave your classroom every day is your smiling face.

Here are just a few benefits of smiling: It releases endorphins (natural pain killers) in the brain, it boosts the immune system; it helps to lift the spirits of the person on the receiving end of the smile; it sends a message that you care; and it sends a message that you are happy to see the person at whom you are smiling. And here are a few facts about students: Students want to be in the classrooms of positive teachers; they are in need of more positive role models; their attitudes in a classroom often mimic those of the teacher; they like to feel that their teachers care about them; and students who believe a teacher cares about them tend to work harder and behave better in the classroom of that teacher. There simply is no downside to smiling, and the benefits are immeasurable!

Question 2: How can I help students develop self-control?

This is a crucial question for teachers because addressing it can form the basis of an effective and sustainable classroom-management system—one that is based on student development and buy-in rather than reactive punishment.

First, a few basics: It's always better to help students increase their capacity of self-control near the beginning of the year instead of waiting for it to become an issue later on. Success can enhance the learning environment for all students in the classroom and increase the odds of a teacher maintaining his or her sanity! In addition, plenty of studies, including psychologist Walter Mischel's famous "marshmallow test," have found significant long-term implications for students who have, and who have not, deepened what are also called "self-regulation" skills. So this is a student-achievement issue as much as it is a classroom-management issue.

For an initial response, let me turn to one of the leading experts in the country on this topic. Then I'll share some examples of how I have applied some of his findings in my classes over the years.

Answer: Building the Muscle

Response from Professor Roy F. Baumeister, who directs the social-psychology program at Florida State University and is the author of Willpower: Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength. *His work has heavily influenced my thinking on classroom management.*

How might one go about increasing self-control? At its core, the capacity for self-control is essentially the ability to change yourself. It operates like a muscle that gets stronger with exercise. This means building self-control in any sphere will help it work better in other spheres.

Self-control depends on willpower, which is a limited resource. That means that it gets used up. All acts of self-control deplete that same resource. Sitting still, paying attention, waiting one's turn, resisting the urge to laugh or shout something out, even delaying going to the restroom all deplete self-control. Some children have stronger impulses than others, and so their self-control will get used up faster than that of more mild-mannered children.

Crucially, some kinds of thinking and decision-making also use willpower. In some of our experiments, we saw dramatic drops in IQ scores after people had exerted self-control. It works in the other direction, too: After thinking hard, self-control will be impaired. A multiple-choice exam or essay test will drain willpower, making it harder to behave oneself afterward. By the end of a day, both thinking and self-control may be compromised, though a nap or snack can help restore the fuel for willpower.

Self-control works like a muscle. It gets tired when you use it. But it also gets stronger with regular exercise. Practicing self-control in any sphere will strengthen your ability to use it in any other sphere. In some of our research, people perform arbitrary exercises of self-control, like improving their posture, changing some everyday speech patterns (e.g., trying to speak with

complete sentences, avoid curse words, or refrain from abbreviations), or using their non-habitual hand for simple tasks like opening doors or brushing teeth. These translate into improved performance on tests of self-control that have no relation to them. A recent study even found that increasing willpower led to more success at quitting smoking.

How to implement this in the classroom? The [Tools of the Mind](#) preschools try to build self-control among young children with games that require them to maintain roles across multiple days and organize their behavior in accordance with the demands of the role. With older students, self-discipline may be cultivated in other ways, such as setting and keeping goals or other deadlines, being neat or punctual, or making defined posture and speech changes.

Larry's Take: How I've Applied This Research in the Classroom

Professor Baumeister's identification of self-control as a "limited energy resource" that needs to be replenished as it get depleted—as well as his view of it as a muscle that can be strengthened through practice—changed my way of thinking about classroom management, even as it opened up a whole new field of study to researchers.

One of his many provocative findings is that the brain uses glucose more quickly than it can be replenished when it is exerting self-control. He concluded that eating food that releases glucose over an extended period of time, like complex carbohydrates, could serve as an effective way to gain more glucose and, therefore, self-control. To this end, I keep a small supply of graham crackers, trail mix, and peanut butter in my classroom. In a very limited study I did—one that I'm sure would not withstand the proof of scientific rigor—student misbehavior in one class was higher in the two weeks prior to my offering the snacks than afterwards. I have also found that the students who tend to have the greatest self-control challenges are the ones who seem to ask for the snacks the most.

Researchers have used Professor Baumeister's discoveries as a reason to explore other ways self-control can be replenished, including through self-affirmation exercises and by encouraging subjects to remember better times in their lives. Along similar lines, I've used these findings to develop short ["reflection cards"](#) on cardstock that I give to students when they are having difficulties. I ask them to leave the room and return when they have written responses to these two requests printed on the card:

1) Please write at least three sentences about a time (or times) you have felt successful and happy.

2) Please write at least three sentences about something that is important to you (friends, family, sports, etc.) and why it's important.

I've never found that asking students to write why they were misbehaving was particularly useful, especially right "in the moment"—often they don't have a clue! But I've found that invariably students return to the classroom in a much better frame of mind after they complete

these Baumeister-inspired cards. In fact, it's not unusual for students—before a situation reaches a point requiring my intervention—to go to my desk where the cards are kept, take one, and then bring it back to their seat where they fill it out and give it to me later. I obviously encourage this kind of self-initiative. (Of course, sometimes my students are a little unclear on the concept behind the cards. After having a conflict with a classmate named "Sam," a student wrote, in response to the second question, "It is very important to me that that I kick Sam's _____.")

I'm sure some could argue that the success of these interventions (both the snacks and the reflection cards) has nothing to do with the research. Instead, they might say, students respond to the snacks because they demonstrate that I care more for them as individuals, and that the reflection cards work because they just give students a break and a chance to reset.

For my teaching practice, though, I'm less concerned about *why they work* and more focused on the fact that *they do work*. And, I would not have tried them without reading about Professor Baumeister's research.

One other strategy I use to help students develop self-control is to teach a lesson using the famous marshmallow test. It's based on the experiment conducted by psychologist Walter Mischel 40 years ago—and since replicated countless times—where a researcher gave a small child a marshmallow. The adult told the child that if he or she could refrain from eating the marshmallow during the next 15 minutes while the adult left the room, a second marshmallow would be provided. Follow-up research found that the children who "held-out" for the second marshmallow were much more successful as adults as measured by education, health, and other indicators. Helping students understand that developing self-control will help them achieve their later goals is an effective and respectful way to help maintain a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom. And let me tell you, saying to students "Don't eat the marshmallow" has a very different ring to it than "Stop throwing spitballs!"

Question 3: How can I minimize unpredictable student behaviors that negatively affect my classroom?

I'm sure we all have experienced "unpredictable" (what a diplomatic way of phrasing it!) student behaviors in our classes. The key question is how we can respond to them in positive ways that are helpful to the student exhibiting the behavior, to the rest of our students, and to our own sanity.

Before turning to the experts, let me begin by sharing a few examples of how I respond to unpredictable or disruptive student behaviors.

First, I try to use negative consequences as a last possible option. There are some extreme behaviors that might require them and, of course, since I'm human and have bad days, too, I'm not always successful in refraining from punitive discipline. Practically speaking, my personal experience is that punishment often just teaches a student that it's "important to not be caught next time."

Here are a few proactive alternatives I use:

Telling students that I am *not* going to call their parents—yet: Instead of calling the parents of a student who is not behaving well, I will often tell him that, instead, I am going to call his home in a week, that I want to just say good things about him, and that he has a week to show that he is the kind of student I know he can be.

Taking steps to create positive interactions: Research cited by Natalie Rathvon in her book *Effective School Interventions: Evidence-Based Strategies for Improving Student Outcomes* points to three common elements in teachers' efforts to help stop disruptive behavior. One is having close physical proximity to the student being addressed. Another is including the word "please" in directions to the student. And the third is giving positive recognition when the student complies. In addition, saying "thank you" can provide immediate positive reinforcement to the student.

Using the interrogative: Although some researchers differ, [recent studies](#) by psychologist Ibrahim Senay at the University of Illinois, not to mention my own personal experience, indicate that students—and most people—are more likely to comply with a task (and do so more quickly) if *asked* to do so instead of being *told*. Saying to a student, "Can you please sit down?" in a calm voice may be more effective than yelling "Sit down!"

Helping students help me: [The Ben Franklin Effect](#) is a psychological dictum holding that people tend to like people they do things for, and many teachers, including me, know that giving "unpredictable" students positions of classroom responsibility can often result in a major behavioral change for the better.

Creating opportunities for reflection: As mentioned earlier, I've created "Reflection Cards" to encourage students go outside and write a few sentences about a past positive experience. This "reset" seems to help students come back more focused and positive.

Working with the student to develop a simple "self-monitoring" behavior system: It could be a small sheet of paper that the student keeps on his or her desk each day that lists one or two target behaviors, or even a Post-It Note on which the student gives him- or herself a mark for every 15 minutes of doing the prescribed behavior. Both the student and teacher quickly give a number or letter assessment at the end of the period. Students have told me that just having the sheet on their desk is a helpful reminder to them.

With this self-monitoring approach, the behavior targets are ideally framed as the behavior you want students to do ("I was on task" or "I controlled myself") instead of what you don't want them to do ("I didn't yell out"). A study conducted by researchers in Glascow, Scotland, found that, to gain a desired behavior, it is more effective to emphasize what you want than what you don't want. In fact, the opposite can occur under conditions of anxiety and stress—students are more likely to do what is listed as what they are supposed to not do!

I should add that I'm not a fan of the carrots-and-sticks approach to changing students' behavior, because I think it's better, ideally, for students to become intrinsically invested in improving their behavior. However, when push comes to shove, I certainly have offered the carrot of extra credit in the short term for students who clearly need it. But I also always have an "exit plan" in mind to quickly move off this kind of operant conditioning.

Of course, few of these "tactics" I've described will have a positive effect if a teacher has not put in the time and energy necessary to develop a solid relationship with students. We need to know their interests, hopes, and dreams for many reasons, not the least being that we can then use that knowledge to help students reflect on whether their actions are the best ones they can be taking to achieve their goals.

As explained by Marvin Marshall, author of *Discipline Without Stress, Punishment, or Rewards,* teachers need to always keep this question in mind: *"Will what I am about to do or say bring me closer or will it push me farther away from the person with whom I am communicating?"*

And that's a perfect transition, because I also asked Marshall, a widely noted author and speaker on discipline, for his response to our question on dealing with unpredictable student behavior.

Answer: Responsibility vs. Rules

Response from Marvin Marshall, who is a noted educator, author, and speaker on motivation and learning. He is the author of Discipline Without Stress, Punishment, or Rewards*.*

The only practical way to minimize unpredictable negative behaviors is to be proactive, rather than to resort to the usual reactive approach of responding.

It seems rather obvious that teachers should teach expectations, but most teachers try to do this by teaching rules. The problem is that rules are aimed at obedience, and obedience does not

create desire. Teachers who rely on rules place themselves in the role of a cop rather than that of a facilitator of learning.

Rules are necessary in games but are counterproductive in the classroom because enforcement of a rule immediately creates adversarial relationships. A much more effective approach is for teachers to list responsibilities, keeping them positive and few in numbers. These become true expectations, a key characteristic of all successful teachers.

Another crucial approach is to understand the differences between classroom management and discipline. Classroom management is about teaching procedures, practicing them, and reinforcing them until they become routine. The biggest mistake so many teachers make is to assume that students know what the teacher would like students to do without first establishing procedures. This is the key to making instruction efficient and is the teacher's responsibility. Discipline, on the other hand, is about the student's behavior, self-discipline, and impulse control and is the student's responsibility.

The easiest way to minimize unpredictable negative behaviors is to establish a procedure whereby students own the consequences for dealing with exhibiting such behaviors. This is in contrast to the usual approach of announcing the outcome (consequence) ahead of time. Just bring to your students' attention the fact that we are all constantly making decisions. If a student chooses to act irresponsibly, then the student will decide on the consequence—pending approval of the teacher. In simple terms, the procedure is to elicit, rather than to impose. The student created the problem, so the student owns the solution. A prime reason that this approach is so successful is that people do not argue with their own decisions.

Larry's Take: Asking the Right Questions

I've also found that asking questions—the right ones—of students can both depolarize the situation and engage students in active and helpful problem-solving. When I say the "right ones," I'm referring to the kind that Marshall has suggested in an [article on his website]() about asking reflective questions and that I've modified here:

• What are your suggestions about how we deal with this situation?

• Can you tell me the name of a person you have a lot of respect for? What do you think he or she would do in this situation?

• How is what you are doing helping you achieve your goals? If it isn't, are you willing to try something different if it would help you?

The wrong question to ask is typically, "Why are you acting like this?" When it comes to behavior, many students have very little idea about how to respond—they generally just don't know.

Of course, all the strategies shared in this book, including these, will go nowhere if we don't keep in mind a [key piece of wisdom](#) imparted by clinical psychologist Xavier Amador in an interview published by the *Harvard Business Review*: "When you are faced with resistance you never win on the strength of your argument, you win on the strength of your relationship."

Question 4: What's one thing to remember about classroom management if you don't remember anything else?

Ah, another key question. None of us can prepare ourselves for every situation that will arise in the classroom. And in the midst of a hectic day—it's been estimated that a teacher has to make 0.7 decisions every minute—it's easy to forget the long list of classroom-management strategies we've been taught or read about. Given all that, what can be our "touchstone," something simple to remember that can guide our interactions?

I'll start by giving you the responses of a few teaching experts and colleagues of mine and then I'll give you my own answer. As you will see, there are many different takes on what the most important component of classroom management is—but they also have a lot in common.

Answer: Control Yourself

Response from Annette Breaux, who is a well-known speaker on education. She is the author of 101 Answers for New Teachers and Their Mentors *and other books.*

Wow! It's difficult to identify one piece of classroom-management advice that trumps all others, because so many of the keys to successful management overlap. But if there is one piece of classroom-management advice that I continually give to all teachers, new and veteran, it's this: **Always appear to be in control of yourself, whether you are feeling that way or not.**

Before you can be an effective manager of others, you must possess (and display) the ability to remain in control of yourself. And the single biggest mistake that we, as teachers, repeatedly make is this: We let students know when they get to us. We let them know that we are personally offended, angry, frustrated, or just plain fed up. We reveal our "buttons," and so they push them all year long. You see, it's a powerful feeling for a student to feel as though he caused you to stop and stare. Or that he caused you to speak with your teeth clenched. Or that his actions made you stare at the ceiling and take extraordinarily deep breaths. Or that the protruding vein in your neck is the product of his handiwork. Children love to feel powerful, and what better way to feel powerful than to control the emotions of an adult? That's why you simply cannot reveal any cracks in your armor.

The best classroom managers never lose their composure. They deal with students calmly and professionally. Students never succeed in pushing the buttons of these teachers, so there's never a struggle for power. The fact is that the more out of control a student becomes, the more in control you must appear. Once a student sees you sweat, the more out of control he will get! So deal with every situation—especially the nerve-racking ones—in a composed, professional manner. Easy to do? No. Effective? Always.

Answer: Practices and Procedures

Response from Harry Wong, who is a legendary educator and the co-author of the much-thumbed book [The First Days of School](#)*, and other popular works on teaching.*

The most important classroom-management strategy is the procedure for how to start class every day or period. Start right and everything else falls into place.

Classroom management consists of the practices and procedures used to manage a classroom so that instruction and learning can take place. A smooth-running classroom is based on the ability of a teacher to teach procedures, such as a procedure for sharpening a pencil, asking for help, taking turns talking, heading a paper, working in groups, and dismissal. Eighty to 90 percent of what many teachers consider discipline problems are not discipline problems. They are the result of a classroom that is run without procedures.

The preeminent procedure found in a well-managed classroom is the appearance of a daily agenda. As soon as the student enters the classroom, there is an agenda posted with the schedule, "bellwork" (for them to get to work immediately), and the objective (that spells out what they will be doing). As an example, a teacher shared a story with me about how she was on her way to teach her next class when she was stopped in the hallway by a colleague. The conversation ended up lasting about 8 minutes and when she entered her classroom late, she was greeted with a wonderful sight: The students were all at work. She asked them what they were doing and they told her they just went ahead and started class without her! They knew the start of class procedures.

Answer: Pre-Assessment

Response from Renee Moore, who is an award-winning educator and taught high school and community college English for 21 years in Mississippi.

The most successful classroom-management tool I've found is showing students from day one that I am concerned about them as individuals, and that success in my English class is possible. Since an accurate and detailed knowledge of the students is vital for all good teaching, I immediately involve students in pre-assessment, while establishing classroom protocols.

My pre-assessment activities, which I have redesigned over several years, include a motivational timed reading; a free-writing response to the reading; a note-taking and oral response exercise using an equally motivational audio recording or podcast; and a personal essay that includes questions such as, "What goals would you like to accomplish in this course?" All of this usually takes a few days.

By the second week of school, we begin analyzing the results together and developing personal English plans (PEPs), which are part of the course portfolio. (Several items in the portfolio are negotiable). The final pre-assessment step is to identify a significant adult of his/her choice who

is willing to act as a mentor for the school year. Students must explain the portfolio to the mentors and get them to sign a contract. I contact the mentors to introduce myself, answer questions, take suggestions for adjustments in the PEP or portfolio, and open the door for communication throughout the year.

Most students start the school year with good intentions, like New Year's resolutions, of doing well, or at least better. We should meet them at that moment prepared to build on those intentions.

Answer: Building a Routine

Response from Jim Peterson, who is a veteran assistant principal at the school where I taught for nine years, Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif. He is also, helpfully, a behavioral therapist. His runs a site called [Alpha Mind Coaching](#).

If I were to make a specific recommendation, it would be to establish a management routine, one that will be consistently and thoughtfully implemented. With practice and time, your routine will become an effortless, established pattern of behavior. Consider the following suggestions:

• Scan the room for off-task "behavioral sparks."
• Address sparks calmly and immediately with one of your tools (eye contact, voice, proximity, etc.).
• Give or post short, specific instructions.
• Circulate throughout room during student practice while continuing to scan and address off-task behavior. Never let the sparks become flames.

It would, perhaps, look like this in a math class:

"Class, I would like you to ... James." (James is starting to turn to his neighbor. The teacher waits a moment for James to comply. …) "Thank you, James." "I would like all of you to solve for X in this equation. You have ____ seconds/minutes before I call on one of you to work the problem. If you finish early, check the problem I have on the board to see if you can find the mistake."

The goal is to reach a level of automaticity in the execution of your routine that allows you to perform it almost unconsciously. This keeps the priority of management from distracting you from your instruction. While not ignoring the other steps of your routine, pick a single step to focus on, and work at it until it becomes habit. Once you have mastered it, move on to the next.

Answer: Developing Relationships

Response from Katie Hull-Sypnieski, who is an English teacher at Luther Burbank High School and also happens to be one of the best teachers I've ever seen. She and I co-authored The ESL/ELL Teacher's Survival Guide.

Effective classroom management for me starts with relationships. Building relationships with my students and their families lays the groundwork for future interactions to be positive. I rely on this foundation of trust and mutual respect throughout the school year as problems come up. Many times student behavior issues can be resolved simply through one-on-one dialogue. Taking time to quickly "check-in" with students throughout the week helps to build and maintain these kinds of positive teacher-student relationships.

Classroom management also means looking at myself and asking: "Am I modeling the behavior I expect from my students?" The longer I teach the more I realize the truth behind the phrase "the teacher sets the tone." The look on my face, my body language, and my overall energy all have an effect on the classroom environment and on student behavior. Students can learn more when they feel safe and supported. I try to build this type of environment by creating routines, structures, and being consistent. When students know what to expect as they walk in the door, they can quickly engage in learning. When they know that I will greet them with a smile every morning no matter what and that they don't need to worry about whether I'm in a bad mood or a good mood, they can focus on their learning and not on me.

Finally, if students are engaged in meaningful and challenging learning activities, then many behavior issues can be prevented. Directly showing students how they can apply what they're learning to their lives can increase motivation and decrease off-task behavior.

Larry's Take: Positively Speaking

Actually, in offering my own response, I'm going to "cheat" a bit right from the start and share not one but two suggestions instead of the one requested. The first is to be positive, and the other is "don't sweat the small stuff" (with a nod to the late Richard Carlson's book of the same name).

Being Positive

There has been substantial research (backed by own personal experience) suggesting that promoting a positive classroom climate can have a major impact on learning and classroom management. Here are some ways to make this happen:

Building relationships: Keep educator Marvin Marshall's advice in mind: *"Will what I am about to do or say bring me closer to the person with whom I am communicating—or will it push me further away?"*

Here are three simple suggestions adapted from the work of instructional expert Robert Marzano:

Take a genuine interest in your students: Learn their interests, hopes, and dreams. Ask them about what is happening in their lives. In other words, lead with your "ears" and not your "mouth." Don't, however, just make it a "one-way street"—share some of your own stories, too.

Act friendly in other ways: Smile, joke, and occasionally make a light supportive touch on a student's shoulder.

Be flexible, and keep your eyes on the learning "prize": One of my students had never written an essay in his school career. He was intent on maintaining that record during an assignment of writing a persuasive essay about what students' thought was the worst natural disaster. Because I knew two of his passions were football and video games, I told him that as long as he used the writing techniques we'd studied, he could write an essay on why his favorite football team was better than its rival or on why he particularly liked one video game. He ended up writing an essay on both topics.

Positive framing: A recent research review in the communications field concluded that "loss-framed messages" (i.e., if you do this, then something bad will happen to you) really don't have the "persuasive advantage" that they are often thought to have. On the contrary, positive-framed messages (if you do this, all this good stuff will happen to you) are more effective.

I've had much greater success in talking with students about how changing their behavior will help them achieve their goals (for example, passing a class, graduating from high school, going to college) than by threatening them with negative consequences (though, admittedly, in a few circumstances, that can work, too).

Saying "yes": "Avoidant instruction" is the term used to describe the action of emphasizing what people shouldn't do: "Don't walk on the grass" and "Don't chew gum" are examples. A 2010 study published in the *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* suggests that a more effective way to get the desired behavior is instead to emphasize what you want people to do.

For example, if a student asks to go the restroom, but the timing is not right for the lesson, I try to respond, "Yes, you can. I just need you to wait a few minutes," instead of just saying, "No." Or if a student is talking at an inappropriate time, instead of saying, "No talking!" I sometimes go over and say to him or her, "I see you have a lot of energy today. We'll be breaking into small groups later and you'll have plenty of time to talk then. I'd appreciate your listening now."

Saying "please" and "thank you": Recent studies out of the University of Illinois and elsewhere suggest that people are more likely to comply with a task (and do so more quickly) if *asked* to do so instead of being *told*. Calmly saying "Can you please sit down?" to a student may very well be more effective than "Sit down!"

Saying "thank you" can provide immediate positive reinforcement to the student. A series of studies out of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania shows that people who are thanked by authority figures are more likely to be cooperative, to feel more valued, and to have a greater sense of self-confidence because of that kind of recognition.

'Don't Sweat the Small Stuff'

The New York Times recently had a story about [Abraham Lincoln's relationship with Utah's Mormons](). Faced with questions about how the government should deal with the group, Lincoln apparently made a deal just to leave them alone. This is what he told a Mormon leader:

"When I was a boy on the farm in Illinois there was a great deal of timber on the farm which we had to clear away. Occasionally we would come to a log which had fallen down. It was too hard to split, too wet to burn, and too heavy to move, so we plowed around it."

In other words, there are some battles not worth fighting.

I also think it's also a good classroom-management guide. We need to "keep our eyes on the prize" and not get sucked into distracting conflicts.

If a student keeps on forgetting to bring a pencil to class, I just give him one from a big box of golf pencils I buy at the beginning of each school year. If they don't have paper, I have a stack. I've got bigger fish to fry, like helping them developing intrinsic motivation to read the first book in their lives and develop an appetite for learning.

Of course, we are only human. We all have bad days when we may not be feeling well or are distracted and consequently may not show the kind of patience these suggestions require. But the issue, I think, is not whether we are positive and "don't sweat the small stuff" *all* the time. It's "How do we operate *most* of the time?"

In addition to getting a class more focused on learning, I've found that I gain two other big benefits by following these suggestions: I get more energized by my teaching and I also feel better about myself.

Question 5: How do I apply classroom-management strategies with younger students?

When this question was originally submitted to my blog, the teacher who submitted it offered a little background:

My student is unable to control his behavior for more than a few minutes at a time, and when reminded of the expectations for behavior in a calm, supportive tone he is prone to extreme anger, including throwing chairs and running away. The only time I have ever raised my voice to him is when he had his hands around a child's neck and I needed him to drop his hands instantly—not exactly the time for a positive, nurturing reminder of making good, safe choices.

I use a calm, nurturing voice with each of my 31 students, including when my one child is making dangerous or disruptive choices. Older, more cognitively developed children have the ability to reason and analyze their actions on a more complex level. I want to be supportive and nurturing to this little guy, but I have 30 other 5-year-olds to manage at the same time. I'd appreciate your thoughts.

That's definitely a tough situation. Since the earliest grade I've ever taught is 7th, I have to defer to others for responses to this one. Here's some advice from three experienced teachers of young children.

Answer: Stability and Attention

Response from Jane Ching Fung, who is a National Board-certified 1st grade teacher in Los Angeles. She has 25 years experience teaching in primary grades.

Unpredictable behaviors (both positive and negative) are a common occurrence in primary classrooms. Young children view and react to the world in their own unique way. Their journey into the educational system and its expectations, procedures, and rules are just beginning. For some, it is their first experience in a formal classroom setting. That being said, I have found that spending extra time on the following has cut down on some of those unpredictable behaviors in my primary classroom:

Predictability: Young children need and like predictability. There is a sense of stability in knowing that every morning you will pick them up in the same spot at the same time, or when they hear a specific song, it means time to clean up and meet on the rug. Just as adults like to have an agenda for the day, young children need one, too. I write our daily agenda on the board in front of the class and go over it with my students daily. On days when there are changes to our schedule, I let them know ahead of time so they are ready for it.

Community consensus: As a class, we discuss, evaluate, and agree on a set of classroom expectations. Together we define what they are and why they are important for our learning

environment. Once expectations are clear and understood by all, we work as a team to help hold each other accountable for those expectations and revisit them as needed throughout the year.

Show, don't tell: Young children need to know, see, and practice what is expected of them and you. I always spend extra time to model and practice classroom procedures and behavioral expectations. Don't assume that students know what you mean when you say it, show them what it looks like, and practice it with them over and over again!

Praise: Highlight and celebrate the positive and minimize the negative. Young children love attention and specific praising of positive behaviors or actions helps reinforce them and ensure that they will be repeated.

Don't spotlight bad behavior: Try to limit the attention given to unpredictable or negative behaviors and deal with them quickly and move on. Taking a child aside for some reflective discussion about the unwanted behavior later on, and away from the spotlight, lets you and the child focus on the specific behavior rather than the emotions the behavior might have caused. Of course, there may be situations where your first response is to keep students and yourself safe first and foremost, and then address the issue later on when things have settled down.

Recognize differences: One of the best ways to minimize unpredictable behaviors is to know your students. It's OK to use creative ways to address their needs. I have had students stand to complete their work, sit in a chair rather than on the rug with the rest of the class, or squish play dough in their hands while they follow a lesson.

Rewards: I am not a big believer in giving prizes for target behavior, but I do reward students when I catch them doing something kind or positive. Some students need the added incentive initially, while others just take pride in doing the right thing. Using "table-tally" points not only help students work as a team to earn the privilege of eating lunch with the teacher but also helps with addition and subtraction skills. In special cases, I may work with parents to use a point system (for a target behavior) with a student to earn extra computer time or homework pass. The goal of reward systems is to phase them out when they are not needed.

Answer: Tangible Rewards

Response from Mathew Needleman, who blogs at [Creating Lifelong Learners](#) *and has been teaching primary grades in Los Angeles for over a decade.*

I believe in reasoning and talking about behavior with all students. However, it's important to note that the purpose of reasoning with kindergartners is to develop language around behavior and help them begin to develop an understanding of what's appropriate. Kindergarten students respond less to talk and more to tangible rewards that are immediate and predictable.

It's also important to target a particular behavior and supply a replacement behavior but not trying to change a child's entire behavior. For example, if students speak when I'm speaking, I

cannot teach. In the case of a child—let's call him "Henry" —who talks over me frequently, I need to ignore any other bad behaviors (except for those that risk student safety) until the calling out behavior is extinguished and replaced with him raising his hand to be called on.

One approach I've used is to place a laminated grid on a students' desk. Every five minutes that Henry doesn't speak out, I mark a square on the grid. If Henry fills in a row of the grid, then he gets to go to the computer, the listening center, or play with blocks for five minutes. Any time Henry speaks while I'm speaking, I erase a row and Henry has to start over. As Henry gets better at stringing out longer periods of time, I increase the amount of time necessary for Henry to earn a stamp on his grid. Once the target behavior is extinguished, I move on to another behavior.

It's also worth looking at our teaching in general. If many students are calling out and interrupting, I need to ask myself if I'm giving enough time for pair-sharing in class. If many students are getting out of their seats, maybe they need more active lessons. A child who struggles with behavior is going to make mistakes, but can be brought back on track with predictable rewards.

Answer: One-on-One Connections

Response from Tom Hobson, who is a preschool teacher, artist, and the author of [Teacher Tom's Blog](#). *For the past 10 years, he's been with the Woodland Park Cooperative Preschools in Seattle.*

My first reaction to this question is to point out the obvious: 31 kindergarteners and one teacher! That's a perfect set up for one kid to eat up an entire classroom, especially in the early years. Why policymakers can't understand this is mind-blowing, but that's a rant for another day.

The bottom line is that you need more adults in the room. When kids are acting out, especially in the ongoing, persistent way you describe, it's going to require the undivided attention of an adult: That's what makes the "calm, supportive" non-punitive approach work. Because I teach in a cooperative school, I have the luxury of at least a half dozen other adults in the classroom at any given moment, people who can either provide an out-of-control child the one-on-one connection he or she needs, or who can take over other classroom responsibilities while I huddle up with the kid myself. You're right, reason and analysis isn't what's called for here. He needs nurturing and listening and it ain't gonna be easy with one teacher and 31 kids.

How can you get other adults in the room? Are there student-teachers around? Can you persuade parents to volunteer time to help out? Does your school have other personnel, like counselors, who can pitch in?

Throwing chairs and strangling, especially if they aren't just one-offs, are pretty extreme behaviors, ones that create a physical danger to the whole class, not to mention a disruption to learning. In my experience, these may be signs that you're dealing with something beyond "normal" misbehavior (e.g., autism spectrum, ADHD, bi-polar disorder, abuse/neglect) all of

which should make the child a candidate for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which would in all likelihood result in more resources (hopefully of the human variety) for your classroom.

You shouldn't have to deal with this alone. Being calm and supportive is the pedagogically correct way to interact with young children when they're bouncing off the walls, but you need help with this.

Question 6: How can I help students develop good habits?

For me, this question points to the heart of a well-run classroom, taking us beyond rules and restrictions and into the all-important realm of intrinsic motivation.

To explore get some possible answers, I reached out to [Charles Duhigg](#), an investigative reporter for *The New York Times* and the author of *[The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business](#)*. He is a winner of the National Academies of Sciences, National Journalism, and George Polk awards, and was part of a team of finalists for the 2009 Pulitzer Prize.

Here is our exchange on the question of developing student habits.

Larry Ferlazzo: Reading an excerpt from your book in *The New York Times*, I was struck by how applicable your ideas are to education. One example is the process you outlined about habit formation. Can you provide a simple outline of this process?

Charles Duhigg: At the core of every habit is a neurological loop with three parts: A cue, which is like a trigger for an automatic behavior; a routine, which is the behavior itself; and a reward, which is how our brain 'learns' to remember a pattern for future use.

When most people think about habits, they tend to focus on the routine—the behavior—rather than the cue and reward. But research tells us that creating new habits inside classrooms and peoples' lives requires focusing on cues and rewards.

Take, for example, exercise habits. In 2002 researchers at New Mexico State University studied almost 300 people who had developed exercise habits, such as working out three times a week. What they found was that many of them had started running or lifting weights almost on a whim, or because they suddenly had free time or wanted to deal with unexpected stresses in their lives.

However, the reason they continued exercising—why it became a habit—was because of a specific cue and a specific reward. The researchers found those people had created running habits by choosing a simple cue (like always lacing up their sneakers before breakfast or always going for a run at the same time of day) and gaining a clear reward (such as a sense of accomplishment from recording their miles or the endorphin rush they got from a jog).

LF: **What are your thoughts on how educators could apply this concept in the classroom to help students develop positive habits?**

CD: Creating intrinsic motivation is among the hardest—and most important—aspects of designing habits.

Let's return to the example of exercise habits. Countless studies have shown that when people first start exercising, the rewards intrinsic to physical activity aren't enough. Put another way, the first time someone goes for a run, even if they record their miles, it won't feel particularly rewarding. The "runner's high" caused by an endorphin rush often doesn't occur the first time someone jogs.

So, to teach our brains to associate exercise with a reward, we need to use a trick. We need to give ourselves something we really enjoy—such as a small piece of chocolate—after our workout. This is counterintuitive because most people start exercising to lose weight. But the goal is to train your brain to associate a certain cue ("It's 5:00 p.m.") with a routine ("Three miles down!") and a reward ("Chocolate!").

Eventually, your brain will start expecting the reward inherent in exercise ("It's 5:00. Three miles down! Endorphin rush!"), and you won't need the chocolate anymore. In fact, according to studies, after about a month, you won't even want the chocolate. But until your neurology learns to enjoy those endorphins and the other rewards inherent in exercise, you need to jump-start the process. And then, over time, it will become automatic to lace up your jogging shoes each morning.

The same is true inside classrooms: According to studies, the rewards inherent in learning—the joy of knowledge and discovery, the bliss of discovering something new—are hard to appreciate at first. Students who haven't developed learning habits don't know how to appreciate the reward. So they need extrinsic rewards, such as praise or treats or something else that is easy for them to appreciate. But over time, according to those studies, the intrinsic rewards will crowd out the external satisfactions, and the behavior will become automatic.

LF: In your book, you discuss the ways some companies seek to instill certain traits in their employees. Are there instances where these techniques might be applied in the classroom?

CD: Absolutely. One of the chapters in *The Power of Habit* is about how Starbucks teaches employees willpower habits. Dozens of studies show that willpower is among the single most important habits for individual success. And the way that Starbucks (as well as numerous schools) turn willpower into a habit is by relying upon the habit loop described above. Teachers can help students identify cues where their willpower is likely to fail (such as when temptations arise, or when heated emotions suddenly erupt) and then choose routines ahead of time. And by helping students recognize the rewards that come from self-discipline (such as making the link between getting your homework done, and the fulfilling sense of mastery when you understand what is going on inside a classroom), those tendencies become habits.

LF: Are there other examples and concepts on forming habits that you discovered in your research that might be applicable to the classroom?

CD: One of my favorite lessons from the book regards a concept called "keystone habits." Some habits, say researchers, are more important than others because they have the power to start a chain reaction, shifting other patterns as they move through our lives. Keystone habits influence how we work, eat, play, live, spend, and communicate. Getting keystone habits right can transform a classroom.

A great example of keystone habits lies in the career of Michael Phelps, the Olympic champion. Phelps started swimming when he was 7 years old. His coach, Bob Bowman, knew Phelps could be great, but to become a champion, he needed habits that would make him the strongest mental

swimmer in the pool. So Bowman focused on giving the swimmer keystone habits that drew on what's known as "the science of small wins."

Small wins are exactly what they sound like. A huge body of research has shown that small wins have enormous power, an influence disproportionate to the accomplishments of the victories themselves. "Small wins are a steady application of a small advantage," one Cornell professor wrote in 1984. "Once a small win has been accomplished, forces are set in motion that favor another small win." Small wins fuel transformative changes by leveraging tiny advantages into patterns that convince people that bigger achievements are within reach.

Before every race, Phelps went through the exact same routine. He woke up at 6:00 a.m., pulled on a pair of sweatpants, and walked to breakfast. Two hours before the starting gun fired, he began his usual stretching regime, starting with his arms, then his back, then working down to his ankles, which were so flexible they could extend more than 90 degrees, farther than a ballerina's *en pointe*. At 8:30, he slipped into the pool and began his first warm-up lap. The workout took precisely 45 minutes. At 9:15, he exited the pool and started squeezing into his LZR Racer, a bodysuit so tight it required 20 minutes of tugging to put it on. Then he clamped headphones over his ears, cranked up the hip-hop mix he played before every race, and waited.

Which is exactly why Phelps's daily stretching routine and eating routine—and every other routine—served as keystone habits: They created a mounting sense of victory. "There's a series of things we do before every race that are designed to give Michael a sense of building victory," Bowman told me. "If you were to ask Michael what's going on in his head before competition, he would say he's not really thinking about anything. He's just following the program. But that's not right. It's more like his habits have taken over. When the race arrives, he's more than halfway through his plan and he's been victorious at every step. All the stretches went like he planned. The warm-up laps were just like he visualized. His headphones are playing exactly what he expected. The actual race is just another step in a pattern that started earlier that day and has been nothing but victories. Winning is a natural extension."

Keystone habits create small wins. So to identify the keystone habits in your life or your students' lives, look for those patterns that give you numerous, small senses of victory; places where momentum can start to build.

Answer: The Role of Repetition

Response from Art Markman, who is a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of Smart Thinking *and* Habits of Leadership*. Here's what he had to say about helping students develop good study habits.*

When we use the term "study habits," we are often more focused on the word study than on the word habits. That is, we want to help students study effectively, but we do not take the habit-learning system seriously.

Habits are behaviors we perform mindlessly, because we have associated those behaviors with a particular environment. We don't have to think about where the gas and brake pedals are in a car, because we have developed habits for pressing them. Ultimately, we want good study behaviors to have the same character as pressing the gas and brake. They should simply be part of the way that students work.

To create real study habits, it is helpful for even the youngest students to learn more about what creates a habit. Habits involve two elements—consistent mappings and repetition.

A consistent mapping happens when the same behavior is performed in the same situation. A car creates a consistent mapping, because pressing the pedal on the left always makes the car accelerate, while pressing the pedal on the right always makes the car stop.

Repetition means that a behavior needs to be repeated in order to become a habit. The more often it is repeated, the easier it is for that behavior to be done automatically again in the future.

To create good study habits, students need to organize their work spaces at school and at home in a consistent way that promotes effective learning. Here are five specific suggestions for creating study habits. While the behaviors themselves are associated with good studying, repeating them consistently is what creates a habit.

1) Use a posture of study: It can be valuable to prepare your body to concentrate. Don't just lie down or sit on the floor to study. Have students find a desk or table and sit up and work. The idea is that lounging in bed or on the floor is associated with sleeping and relaxing. Don't try to reprogram that to be a posture of study. If students consistently sit up to study, they will develop the habit to concentrate when in that posture.

2) Create distraction-free zones: Multitasking gets in the way of effective studying. When students switch between work and the Internet or their smartphone, they do not work efficiently or learn deeply. Have students park their technology far away from their work spaces to minimize distractions. That way, they will not develop the habit of checking emails and texts in the middle of studying.

3) Make mistakes: When students are doing homework, they often focus on getting every homework problem right. As a result, students skip problems that are too hard for them. Getting an answer wrong highlights the skills that need to be improved. Help students along by using completion grades on homework and giving students a chance to correct exam mistakes for partial credit.

4) Don't just read, do: Students often develop the habit of reading over material before a test. Effective learning requires testing yourself as you go along. After all, no student would ever think they could learn to play a musical instrument just by reading about it. So, why should history, literature, or science be any different? It is crucial for students to make self-testing a key habit when studying.

5) Study early and often: Students typically develop the habit of waiting until right before an exam to start looking over material from class. Memory research makes clear that spreading study over a long period of time is better for learning. So, give students frequent reasons to study rather than forcing them to study only before big high-stakes tests.

Remember that the mind is a habit-creation machine. If you get students to do these behaviors consistently, they will become the automatic way that students organize their learning time.

Question 7: How do you teach students to listen better?

Many of us have faced, or are facing, this challenge. It can be frustrating to hear students asking "What are we supposed to do?" within seconds of having explained instructions. But there are some effective strategies to deal with this challenge. Let me outline some that I use:

Written instructions and modeling. A major mistake many of us make is not providing written instructions before an activity. As noted in a 2008 article published in *American Educator*, extensive research emphasizes the importance of providing verbal and written instructions to English-language learners, but this classroom practice works well for all learners. This will not only reduce the number of repetitive questions from students, but it is also far easier for a teacher to point to the board in response to that inevitable repeated question, "What are we supposed to do?"

Teacher modeling is also an important instructional strategy that is often shortchanged in the classroom. After giving instructions, actually demonstrating them can go a long way toward helping students understand what they are supposed to do. In addition, as Dale H. Schunk, a professor of education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, has documented, research suggests that modeling has a major impact on increasing student self-confidence that they can replicate the task. Instructional expert Robert Marzano also recommends teacher modeling as a way to "deepen" student comprehension.

Of course, teacher modeling does not have to be limited to instructions for assignments. If we want students to be good listeners, we need to try to model that behavior at all times, too. We can lead with our ears and not our mouths during our interactions with students in and out of the classroom. Who among us has not abruptly cut off a student because we felt constrained by time? We probably all can also remember times when we have been distracted while a student has been speaking with us.

Lessons on listening. Providing explicit lessons on the importance of listening is another way to help students improve their skills. For example, ask students to answer if and why they think being a good listener is important and share what they believe are the qualities of a good listener. Then teachers could invite students to respond to research results like the following—first in small groups and then as a class:

"Caring listening can result in people feeling better about themselves, becoming less defensive, and being more open to new experiences."

A recent TED Talk by Julian Treasure on the importance of listening could be used as a discussion starter in the same way. (Thanks to school media specialist Sue Harlan for the recommendation.)

Of course, there may always be some students who will continue having listening "challenges" no matter what you do. If you have some of those students in your class even after trying the strategies suggested here, you might want to consider doing what I've tried to do after hearing another teacher's advice: Swallow your frustration and chalk it up to those particular students

needing to feel connected because of other issues they face. And I try to feel honored that they choose to want to feel connected to me, and try to remember that they're choosing to act that need out by repeatedly asking, "What are we supposed to do?"

Answer: Avoid Over-Talking

Response from Heather Wolpert-Gawron, who is a middle school teacher in San Gabriel, Calif., and the author of 'Tween Crayons and Curfews: Tips for Middle School Teachers.

Teaching how to listen is about controlling one's own responses.

First off, and I mean this as a teacher who has been burned by her own over-talking: Don't be superfluous. If you want students to listen, make sure you've built up a trust that what you're saying matters.

Also, delegate the voice in the room as much as possible. Mix up the voice that the students hear, and their ears will focus more on what's being said.

Additionally, only give an instruction once. Not twice. Once. After that, don't get mad if the students need a little training time to believe you mean it. Give them ways to get the information without asking you again and they will either a) begin to listen harder, or b) problem solve independently more often. It's a win-win.

If you're looking for a cool listening lesson, meanwhile, visual note-taking is a great activity to build up students' listening muscles. Read your students a passage or excerpt, and then time them as they sketch every detail they recall. When time is up, slowly read them an itemized list of details they may or may not have heard. For every named detail that they sketched, they get points. The goal is to get the most points, and the teacher decides what details the students should have absorbed with only one reading.

Learning to listen is about practice. Make sure you give students opportunities to practice because listening isn't a skill that comes naturally to many. It takes scaffolding, but it can be developed.

Question 8: How can you engage students without carrots and sticks?

I've hinted a couple times elsewhere in this book that I'm not a big fan of the carrots-and-sticks approach to classroom management. I first laid out my philosophy in my book *Self-Driven Learning*, in which I noted that rewards-and-punishments systems can often be like Mickey Mouse in the movie "Fantasia." You may recall that in that movie Mickey is an apprentice sorcerer who is told to fill up a pail of water from the outside well. He's lazy, though, and uses a spell he doesn't really understand to make a broom do it for him. However, he can't stop it, and the house becomes flooded. In other words, rewards and punishments might "work" in the short-term, but end up with disastrous results over a longer period.

Much research shows that carrots can encourage compliance with mechanical tasks, but are ineffective when it comes to work that requires higher-order or creative thinking. (For a fascinating overview of that research, see this TED Talk on motivation by author Daniel Pink.) Other studies show that punishment or coercive discipline can hinder the development of responsibility in students. In my experience, it often just teaches students that it's important not to get caught next time and can result in added student distraction and disengagement from work.

Does this mean we should never use rewards and punishments? Of course not. Rewards might be used to entice students to try new books or tasks that they might not try otherwise, and there are transgressions that absolutely require a negative consequence (and there is value in getting input from the student about what he/she thinks that consequence should be).

The question is: Do we tend to use rewards and punishments as a *first* or as a *last* resort?

To dig further into that question, let's turn to some educators who've been particularly innovative in this area.

Answer: Create the Right Conditions

Response from Chris Wejr, who is an elementary school principal in British Columbia, Canada. He has taught and coached at both the high school and elementary school levels and is passionate about motivation, leadership, family engagement, and assessment. He blogs at The Wejr Board.

Becoming a father and making the transition to teaching primary students has made it very clear to me that our kids begin their lives with an inquisitive mind and an enviable level of excitement for learning. Primary students seem to have an energetic curiosity and require very little motivation for engagement; however, as these students progress through our system and the focus moves from the child to the curriculum and learning to grades, they often seem to lose that drive.

We, as parents and educators, often influence this shift by focusing on results and external motivators. By dangling things such as grades, praise, prizes, awards, and threats of punishment,

we unintentionally rob students of responsibility and their intrinsic drive for learning; we alter the focus to what they will get rather than what they are doing. By the time students reach high school, their instinctive desire to learn has often shifted to a quest for grades. For those students who do not see relevance and purpose in this quest, they often disengage as learners, and then we feel the need to resort to motivating by offering carrots and threatening sticks.

I strongly believe that—to adapt from Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, researchers on motivation at the University of Rochester, whom Daniel Pink wrote about in *Drive*—we cannot motivate students; we can only create the conditions in which students can motivate themselves. We cannot make kids learn; we can make them behave a certain way, memorize and complete tasks in the short-term when we are supervising them, but this does not mean they are gaining the skills and receiving the support needed to be learners.

But even in a system dominated by curricula, scores, and grades, we can still work to tap into that intrinsic drive by focusing on the following:

1) **Relationships**: A trusting, caring relationship helps students understand that learning is about them rather than test scores and curricula. In order for us to make the curriculum relevant to their learning we must build relationships with our students.

2) **Ownership**: Work with students so they have a voice in their learning. Through a focus on what's called "Assessment for Learning," we include students in assessments and provide ongoing dialogue around descriptive feedback (rather than grades) based on agreed upon criteria and goals. Harvard professor and author Dr. Ross Greene states that "all students can do well if they can." We need to provide the feedback on behavior and learning skills so kids can do well. We also need to include students in this conversation.

3) **Choice**: Provide students with more autonomy for how they will learn and demonstrate their learning.

4) **Relevancy**: Relate the curriculum to the interests and passions of your students. They need to see meaningful connections and purpose for real learning to occur.

5) **Success**: Tom Schimmer, a British Columbia author and leader in the assessment for learning field, says that we need to "over-prepare 'em" for that first summative assessment. Push back those first few assessments and ensure students do well then build on this experienced success. We need to focus on strengths, support the challenges, and help students have a growth mindset so they can experience failure and success as feedback and develop the belief they can all be learners.

Our students arrive at school motivated to learn. Through accountability measures and other structures we are often forced to produce short-term results. Unfortunately, this can lead to the use of extrinsic motivators that place the focus away from the learning and on the immediate result rather than the skills and support needed for long-term engagement and success. As educators, we must continue to work to create the conditions to best support our students so that

they can maintain that intrinsic drive for learning and not become someone who only reaches for that dangled carrot.

Answer: Going With the 'Flow'

Response from Jeffrey Wilhelm, who is a professor of English education at Boise State University and co-author of [Literacy in the Lives of Young Men](#) *and* [How to Engage Boys (and Girls) in Their Literacy Learning](#). *Here's his response on the question of engaging without necessarily using external rewards and punishments.*

When Michael Smith and I researched the literate lives of boys both inside and outside of school, we found that the boys in our study were largely disengaged by school and impervious to extrinsic motivations and stimuli.

On the other hand, they were highly motivated by challenges that were connected to their immediate lived experience. We found that the psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's conditions of "flow" experience—or total immersion in the present moment—explained every instance of motivation we observed, both inside and outside of school.

So what are the conditions for situated motivation and flow? I'll itemize them, as adapted from Csikszentmihalyi's work *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*:

• Clear goals and continual feedback.

• A sense of developing competence and control.

• A challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill and assistance as needed to be successful.

 • A focus on the immediate experience.

 • Acknowledgement of the importance of the social aspect (we added this one).

In our follow-up study in 2006, we found that the conditions of flow were created in classrooms through inquiry environments that reframed what was being taught as a compelling problem to be solved. Essential questions that were edgy and debatable promoted engagement and invited students into disciplinary discussions and meaning-making.

Another highly effective instructional and motivational technique is known as frontloading. Frontloading activates kids' prior interests and knowledge and builds on these. Frontloading can take the form of prewriting or prereading work that prepares students for success. Famed University of Chicago educator George Hillocks has asserted that the only resource you have to teach kids something new is what they already know and care about.

Sequencing instruction so that expertise is developed step by step, just like moving through the levels of a video game, is engaging because it builds competence and moves kids progressively through their zones of proximal development. Nothing is more motivating than getting visible signs of accomplishment, and increasing control and competence.

Group work and collaboration around significant projects obviously emphasize the social element. Significant culminating projects that address the essential question, and that allow students to stake their identity (versus playing "guess what the teacher already knows") are also highly motivating, particularly if the work is shared, made public, or archived (e.g., by posting it on the Internet).

Motivation doesn't exist internally to a person, but in a person's transaction with the conditions of a situation. It is under our control to make sure our classrooms are motivating environments.

Student motivation is probably the primary and certainly the prerequisite challenge facing teachers. But providing for the conditions of motivation can help us to meet this challenge in ways that also deepen student understanding.

Question 9: What does student engagement look like?

The reader who submitted this question to me offered a little additional background:*The question that I seem to hear from teachers comes up when we discuss engagement vs. on- task behavior. Teachers want to know how you can see engagement. Instructional expert Paula Bevan tells us that engagement equals brain sweat, but can we see a kiddo's brain sweating? So what evidence can administrators and teachers collect that will show true engagement and not on-task behavior?*

It's an excellent question and one that I believe many educators—and administrators—misunderstand. Student engagement is emphatically not just a matter of students looking busy.

Let's start with some basics. Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh have identified student engagement as having three equally important components:

Behavioral engagement: Are students getting their work done on time, are they participating in class discussions, do they follow school rules?

Emotional engagement: Are students feeling excited about being in class, are they genuinely interested in the lessons?

Cognitive engagement: Are they actively trying to apply the knowledge they learn in one class to other classes and to life outside of school, and are they using metacognitive strategies?

What teacher doesn't want to see these qualities present in their classroom?

Yet it appears from research done by the National Research Council and others (not to mention the observations of countless teachers) that academic engagement generally plateaus for many students when they enter middle school and go downhill from there. And not only does lack of engagement signal trouble for life in the classroom; some research suggests it can also be an indicator of challenges later in life.

Now that we have reviewed its importance, let's explore some ideas on how to engage, and re-engage, our students. This will take us from basic classroom strategies to, later in this section, a big-picture look at the psycholological concept of "flow," a state of intellectual immersion and focused energy. This concept has long been of interest to me as an educator hoping to get the most out of my students.

Answer: Interactivity Is Key

Response from Mark Barnes, who is author of Role Reversal: Achieving Uncommonly Excellent Results in the Student-Centered Classroom. *He is a 20-year classroom teacher and creator of the award-winning how-to video site for educators, Learn It In 5.*

What distinguishes true engagement from simple on-task behavior is interactivity. Classrooms founded on mundane assignments, like rote-memory worksheets and multiple-choice tests, are easy to spot. However, putting a student on a computer to compose an essay, instead of asking her to write it in a composition notebook, isn't much better than on-task seatwork. Engaging activities can't be judged by points and percentages; they require a conversation and an opportunity to share both successes and failures across the classroom and, in some cases, across geographical borders. Tasks that are interactive and engaging have three distinct features:

1) Student choice: When students are given the opportunity to choose how to demonstrate learning, they are far more apt to participate than they would be with the "do-this-and-do-it-my-way" worksheet. Engagement begins with autonomy, and teachers can learn a great deal about how students learn by evaluating the choices they make to demonstrate understanding and curiosity. Saying to students, "How can you show me that you've learned about inertia?" is far more engaging than telling students to "Fill in the blanks on this test."

2) Digital tools: Used appropriately, technology can be a powerful catalyst for engagement. The 21st-century learner is a digital native and is already inclined to use the Internet, social media, and mobile devices. When coupled with choice of tools to use and a variety of methods in which to deliver information, technology becomes the center of student engagement. Digital projects also provide the opportunity for sharing online. There's nothing more engaging than teaching students how to use an online community like Goodreads.com and receiving alerts on your phone when they add a book to a shelf or review something they've just read. Plus, most online-learning tools can be used as a platform for narrative feedback, which gives students a chance to improve upon their work and demonstrate mastery.

3) Collaboration: Group projects, driven by student choice and an assortment of digital tools, inspire the aforementioned interactivity and feedback that provide clear evidence of engagement. When students collaborate, they feel a sense of collective and individual pride in their accomplishments. Students performing simple on-task activities feel incomplete and, worse, learn very little.

Answer: Hard-Working, Happy, and Nice

Response from Jeffrey Zoul, who is the assistant superintendent for teaching and learning in the Rock Island-Milan school district in Illinois. He is also the author of several books on education, including [Improving Your School One Week at a Time: Building the Foundation for Professional Teaching and Learning](#) *and* [The 4 CORE Factors for School Success](#)*, co-authored with Dr. Todd Whitaker. Here's his response on the question of what student engagement looks like.*

To a large extent, when it comes to student engagement, I think, "I know it when I see it." But that, of course, is helpful to no one, so allow me to delve deeper.

When I served as principal of a large suburban middle school, I made it a point to read the daily morning announcements every day. I tried to keep these announcements very brief but I closed each day's announcements with the same remark, 180 days a year. After sharing all necessary announcements, I would say, "Students and teachers, remember to work hard, have fun, and be nice today."

Now, that is not exactly rocket-science advice and surely nothing I picked up in my doctoral classes. Yet it was, in essence, what I hoped to see occurring throughout our school each and every day: students and teachers teaching and learning together and, in the process, working hard, having fun, and being nice—or, to put it another way, students and teachers being highly engaged. You see, the harder kids worked, the more fun they had doing it, and the nicer they were to each other while doing it, the more engaged they were in the process of learning. Happy, hard-working, and nice students are also, I believe, highly engaged students.

But what evidence can we find during classroom visits to support whether or not students are "engaged" (working hard, having fun, being nice)? We can begin with the obvious—creating checklists of behaviors we would expect to see in each of the three areas. We can also spend intentional time examining the quality of student work assigned and completed. Most importantly, perhaps, we must continue to query our students, surveying them regularly (think daily exit tickets) and periodically (engagement surveys) to assess their level of engagement and elicit their feedback on what is working and what is not.

Student engagement is a goal we would all agree is worth attaining. As with any other goal we agree is important (e.g., "high expectations," "relationships,"), we need to begin taking specific, actionable steps to achieve it. The process begins with collaborative professional dialogue centered on: defining what it looks like, identifying what is already working and striving to replicate it systemically, conducting intentional classroom observations focused on it, and including our students in the conversation about it. The more we do this, the more we will agree on the meaning of it when we say, "We know it when we see it."

So stay "engaged" in the conversation—and work hard, have fun, and be nice today!

Answer: What Do You Hear?

Response from Heather Wolpert-Gawron, who is a middle school teacher in San Gabriel, Calif., and author of 'Tween Crayons and Curfews: Tips for Middle School Teachers.

I disagree with the assumption that we can't see a kid's brain sweating. I think we can. Or, at least, we can hear it. Levels of engagement, I believe, can be measured by what we are hearing almost more than by what we are seeing. Are the students asking questions? Are those questions in a structured, formal ask-and-answer format or are they rapid-fire and spontaneous? Are the questions simple, level-one questions or higher-level questions that could even stump an adult? If a student can make a teacher's brain sweat, then you know they are really engaged and thinking. You might need to lay the groundwork, of course, teaching early on and repetitively what makes

good questions. But by a certain point of the year, after being submerged in the expectation of high-level questioning, the students will begin to use those skills more naturally in their collaborative conversations.

Other key indicators of engagement: Are the students teaching each other? Are they approaching each other for solutions before or instead of coming to you, the teacher? The goal, after all, is to have students own the information. Ownership pairs nicely with confidence and pride in sharing solutions and answers. Students enjoy being experts. It's their eagerness about sharing the expertise that can indicate true engagement.

Answer: On Creating Flow

Response from David J. Shernoff, who is an associate professor of educational psychology at Northern Illinois University. He is the author of Optimal Learning Environments to Promote Student Engagement. *For additional perspective on the issue of what student engagement looks like, I thought we should return to the subject of "flow," with some perspective from a scholar in educational psychology.*

Ten years ago, research on student engagement was a relatively small field; it has since proliferated greatly. "Engagement" is now one of the more common buzzwords in education. I believe the reason that schools at all levels, from elementary schools to institutions of higher education, have woken up to the importance of student engagement is that pervasive student disengagement is a real problem for schools—and one that's not just confined to the classroom.

Disengagement often manifests in a gradual cycle of withdrawal from schooling, culminating in school dropout for large numbers of youth. Because disengagement can be responsible for declining enrollments, it can be a very expensive problem affecting schools' bottom lines. Research shows that significant numbers of youth are disengaged from schooling year after year (statistics on engagement from national surveys are remarkably stable), with upwards of 40 to 60 percent of students characterized as chronically disengaged, including both high and low achievers. Over 1 million (or 30 percent) of all 9th graders fail to graduate from high school four years later, with the dropout rate approaching 50-55 percent in some urban communities.

My colleagues and I have researched engagement from the perspective of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. I first became interested in this perspective while reading books by Csikszentmihalyi at a time when I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the variety of behavioral-management and incentive programs, in combination with psychotropic medications, used in classrooms for children with special needs and behavioral challenges— classrooms in which I was teaching at the time. Becoming completely absorbed in activities one was passionate about seemed antithetical to the ways in which the behaviors of the students in my classroom were induced and manipulated, seemingly for the sake of adult control over them.

Later, after my doctoral training under Csikszentmihalyi himself at the University of Chicago, I came to see flow as antidotal to educational systems based on fear and control. I also began to

see that most important forms of learning—such as the learning of skills and abilities needed to succeed in a career—are mediated through flow experiences. In a very real sense, most learning is flow.

My colleagues and I have focused on conditions in high school classes that facilitate flow and engagement with learning. High school students unfortunately experience less flow in classrooms than in almost any other setting, but there are certain conditions that make it more likely. We have called environments in which students are highly engaged in learning "optimal learning environments." The primary characteristic of optimal learning environments in high school classrooms is the simultaneous combination of "environmental challenge" and "environmental support."

Environmental challenge is characterized by:

• Working on tasks of sufficient complexity for the learner's skill level.

• Clear goals and perceived importance of the task.

• The building of conceptual understanding and/or language skills.

• The opportunity to demonstrate one's performance, as through assessment.

Environmental support is characterized by:

• Positive relationships with teachers and peers.

• Support for motivational drives.

• Constructive feedback.

• Opportunities to be both active and interactive.

One interesting finding is that environmental support is engaging all by itself, whereas environmental challenge is engaging only in combination with environmental support. In other words, if we are going to challenge learners, we also need to support them to succeed. Otherwise, they are likely to experience more anxiety than flow.

The creation of optimal learning environments in K-12 systems appears to be the exception to the rule. However, adolescent-aged students do report high engagement in the context of many organized after-school programs, including school-based programs. Interestingly, students can be highly engaged during academic- and arts-enrichment activities in these programs in addition to athletic and recreational activities.

As the movement to expand the learning day gains momentum, it will be important to restructure the school day to expand not only time, but also opportunities for students to become engaged. For many schools, this may be achieved mainly by virtue of forming more, better, and closer

partnerships within the community, so that learning opportunities are not all confined to school grounds. Students generally find more meaning and relevance when engaged in projects that solve problems or fashion products that are valued by the community. Providing each student with a unique role to play in the context of project-based learning also appears to be an active ingredient for harnessing students' engagement and their natural drive to learn, produce, and communicate.

Answer: Tips for Flow

Finally, for more of a how-to perspective, here's an excerpt from an article entitled "Eight Tips for Fostering Flow in the Classroom" by Jill Suttie, published in Greater Good, the online magazine of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California-Berkeley. It is reprinted here with permission. I think that Suttie's tips form as good a definition of what student engagement looks like as I've seen.

1) Challenge kids—but not too much: One of the central conditions for flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is that an activity be challenging at a level just above one's current abilities. If a challenge is too hard, students will become anxious and give up; if it's too easy, they'll become bored. It's important to find the sweet spot where the activity is difficult enough to challenge students without overwhelming them. Students may require a lesson to be scaffolded—breaking it down into manageable pieces—in order to find the right balance.

2) Make assignments feel relevant to students' lives: Research has shown that when students understand the relevance of a classroom activity, they are more likely to engage in it. Whenever possible, it can help for teachers to point out how an activity connects to students' own lives, or encourage students to discover the relevance for themselves. In a 2009 study published in Science, researchers Chris Hulleman and Judith Harackiewicz found that when low-performing high school science students were instructed to write about how a lesson was relevant to their lives, these students showed greater interest in the subject—a fundamental part of flow—and got higher grades than students who didn't participate in the writing exercise.

3) Encourage choice: When students are given an opportunity to choose their own activities and work with autonomy, they will engage more with the task. In a 2000 study led by Aaron Black of the University of Rochester, students who sensed more teacher support for autonomy felt more competent and less anxious, reported more interest and enjoyment in their work, and produced higher-quality work in their class than students who didn't believe they had as much autonomy.

4) Set clear goals (and give feedback along the way): Csikszentmihalyi has found that a fundamental condition for flow is that an activity should have clear goals, which provides structure and direction. This has also proven to be true in the classroom, especially when students help define their goals. And as students progress toward these goals, research suggests it's also important for them to receive ongoing feedback along the way. This doesn't necessarily mean that teachers must interrupt a student's process, but it does mean that students must be

aware of how (or whether) their efforts are moving toward the goal. By receiving this kind of feedback, students can adjust their efforts in a way that helps them stay in flow.

5) Build positive relationships: Education researcher David Shernoff, of Northern Illinois University, has shown that positive peer and teacher-student relationships increase flow. It can sometimes take more time to build these relationships, but some subtle strategies can go a long way, such as by communicating respectfully with students and making clear that their input is valued. For instance, Alex Angell, a history teacher at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, Calif., says that during class discussions, he's careful to let students complete their thoughts and then use his own body language—eye contact, leaning toward them—to show he's heard their views.

6) Foster deep concentration: A bedrock of flow is feeling completely absorbed by an activity, and that often requires a state of deep concentration. This may be hard to facilitate in a classroom, particularly in middle or high school, where periods are relatively short. But if it's possible to allow, students will reap rewards from working without interruption. Research by Kevin Rathunde of the University of Utah, conducted with Csikszentmihalyi, found that flow was higher in Montessori schools than in traditional schools because of the more flexible schedules of Montessori schools—students who are fully concentrating on a task are not interrupted as often.

7) Offer hands-on exercises: Flow research, like other education research, has shown that hands-on activities often get kids more engaged in their learning than more passive activities. Making things, solving problems, and creating artwork tend to induce more flow than lectures or videos, as long as the materials students need to complete the assignment are readily available.

8) Make 'em laugh: Humor is a great way to engage kids in any setting, especially the classroom. It helps encourage flow not just by getting kids' attention and keeping them engaged but by modeling enthusiasm for a subject. A teacher doesn't have to be an actor or comedian to engage kids, but it helps to speak their language. When Shernoff and others explored what types of activities induced flow in high school classrooms, they found that teachers who used humor and showed enthusiasm for the lesson could even turn a lecture into an engaging activity.

Question 10: How can we foster more student engagement in taking high-stakes standardized tests?

This is obviously a central issue in the No Child Left Behind era. How can we keep students engaged in classes when one of the central aspects of schooling is standardized-test preparation, which can range from tedious to demoralizing?

As you can probably tell, I'm not a huge fan of high-stakes standardized testing. However, one of the key lessons I learned in my 19-year community-organizing career is that, though we should always recognize the tension inherent in "the world as we'd like it to be" and "the world as it is," living in the former seldom leads to success in the latter.

That belief *doesn't* preclude me from organizing for more effective student-learning assessments. But it *does* push me to explore creative, ethical, and effective ways to help my students become more engaged in the standardized tests they have to take now, especially since it's been shown that motivation can play a key role in a test-takers' success.

Here are a few simple techniques, originally outlined in my book *Self-Driven Learning: Teaching Strategies For Student Motivation*, that I use to prepare students for tests:

Pre-writing. Asking students to take a minute or two prior to the test to write about a successful personal experience or to write about another successful person has been shown to result in higher test scores. (See for example, this 2010 study in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.) My personal favorite activity in this category is to give students five minutes to respond to this prompt: *Think about one of your ancestors, and write about one or more successes he or she had in life. Write a few sentences about the person, and draw a picture that represents him or her, and/or his or her success.*

Social interaction. Dividing the class into pairs and having them talk about a social issue for 10 minutes prior to a test has been found to result in higher scores. This kind of social interaction and building of "social capital" increases mental processing speed and working memory, according to a 2007 University of Michigan study. Why? It appears to warm up the brain, especially areas like working memory and concentration, which are used in both social engagement and taking a test.

Nourishment. According to numerous sources, researchers have found that giving students peppermints on test days has resulted in higher scores on tests. It is thought that mints both provide glucose for the brain that can enhance memory and that their odor somehow increases student attention.

Hydration. Drinking a cup of water 20 minutes prior to taking a test has also been found to lead to more positive results. Researchers are not exactly sure why this happens, but one theory is being properly hydrated helps students concentrate on other things.

Mental cleanse. Researchers at the University of Chicago have found that having students write about their test-taking thoughts and worries for 10 minutes prior to the start of the exam

"canceled out the negative effects of test anxiety." The thinking is that putting the worries on paper helped clear the working memory of stressful clutter that would disrupt cognitive functions.

Now, let me once again turn to some other educators for advice.

Answer: Self-Efficacy

Response from Michael Opitz and Michael Ford, who are professors of reading education and co-authors of the forthcoming book, Engaging Minds in the Classroom: The Surprising Power of Joy.

In our close examination of research and the consensus of expert opinion in the affective dimensions of joyful learning in classrooms, we have discovered a basic formula to consider in looking at issues of engagement. Engagement usually occurs when three key conditions are present.

• Learners feel that the task in front of them is within their reach or what some researchers term a sense of self-efficacy.

• Learners value the outcome from the task.

• The task is completed in an environment in which learners feel safe.

If any one of these conditions is not present, engagement drops. So if your students have the ability to be successful with the state-mandated exams, make sure they are reminded verbally and through preparation activities that these are tasks at which they can succeed. To create a safe atmosphere in which to prepare and take the exams, address the stress, anxiety, and pressure students may bring to these situations, even if think you are already providing enough support. This may be especially important if negative consequences are the primary vehicle for motivating students to take the tests.

More often than not, however, students have very little reason to value the outcomes of state-mandated tests. They don't have much "skin in the game." Unlike self-selected standardized assessments where scholarships, college admission, college credit, or professional licensure might be at stake, these externally-mandated tests provide few benefits to increase individual commitment. Unfortunately, in our review of affective dimensions, experts point out that researchers have spent very little time discussing how to get students to value tasks such as these. As new assessment consortia embrace more performance-based assessments that actively involve learners in tasks that allow some choice, however, you might encourage students to work with peers on topics of greater interest and show what they know–and perhaps then levels of engagement will increase.

Answer: Valuing the Process

Bryan Harris is the director of professional development and public relations for the Casa Grande elementary school district in Arizona and the author of [Battling Boredom: 99 Strategies to Spark Student Engagement](#).

Many educators start with the question, "How can I motivate my kids to do better on these tests?" I think that's the wrong question. I believe most students are naturally, intrinsically motivated to achieve, but achievement from a student perspective might not match teachers' needs or assumptions, especially in light of high-stakes, state-mandated tests. For our most struggling, at-risk students a better question might be, "How can I reframe the discussion to match what students already value?" Sometimes there is also an assumption that kids don't want to do well on state tests. I think many really do want to do well, but a certain level of disengagement is totally natural if they don't value the tests as much as we do.

Think about it: As adults, we act in the same way all time. We disengage from things that we don't value. For example, many of us don't respond to requests for feedback for online purchases from places like eBay because we don't think our feedback will make a difference. Many of us don't vote for the same reasons, thinking our one vote won't make a difference. The bottom line is it's natural to disengage from things we don't value or from things we personally believe are meaningless, regardless of how important other people think they are.

If we believe that students (even the ones who struggle the most) really want to do well, we have some choices to make. So, what are they?

• We can give up, throw in the towel and exclaim, "That's just the way things are." As soon as we do this, our students will know. If we hold low expectations for them, they will typically live down to them.

• We can bribe them to "do their best" or outright threaten them with the dire consequences of inaction. The failure of this approach is well-documented. If you think this approach works, why is voter turnout still so low?

• We can work with them to value the process over the product. In short, in conferences with students (as opposed to ordering, demanding, or requiring), discuss how the process of learning is personally rewarding, meaningful, or interesting. All too often with struggling students we focus on the product or end result of the test (which is usually a grade or number—something a struggling student may not care about). We preach to them with admonitions such as, "You need to do well so you can get into college," or "Our school's rating is dependent on the results of this test, so we need you to do your best." Once again, if a student doesn't value those things, there may be no real reason to put forth the effort. So, stress the process of learning over the final product—the journey as opposed to the destination.

Question 11: How can teachers best assist students with special needs?

In an effort to better support students with special needs, my colleague Katie Hull-Sypnieski and I recently developed what we call the "The Five-by-Five Approach to Differentiation Success." To explain this approach we often begin with an anecdote:

Two 9th grade boys kept falling asleep while reading in our class. "If you're sleepy," we told them, "you could ask for a hall pass to get a quick drink of water, stand in the back of the room and read, or sit on the desk behind you as long as you are reading." They perked up at the chance to sit on the desks and were soon engrossed in their books.

Obviously, not every attempt at differentiation goes so smoothly, but it does convey the idea of being flexible while keeping your "eyes on the prize" of learning.

The strategies we employ in moving forward to this goal include the following:

1) Assessing: At the start of the year (and, in fact, throughout the entire year), we want to find out more about where our students' skills are, a process that informs our differentiation approach. Instructional expert Robert Marzano has called formative assessment "one of the more powerful weapons in a teacher's arsenal." The "assessment" comes from the Latin "assidere," which means "to sit beside." This origin is reflected in the process of formative assessment, as teachers work alongside students, evaluating evidence and making adjustments to teaching and learning.

2) Keeping students moving forward: This priority drives everything we do with students—even small moves like inviting sleepy readers to sit on top of desks. Studies of "The Progress Principle," which Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer write about in their book of that title, have found that a key to intrinsic motivation is feeling that you are making progress in meaningful work. We can reinforce intrinsic motivation by emphasizing small wins.

3) Differentiating assignments: Students can complete the same types of mental tasks while producing different end products. The idea is that students can gain proficiency even when completing different types of assignments or a different number of assignments (one big project vs. five smaller assignments). This happens in our classrooms during free reading time, when students practice using similar reading strategies while reading different books. We have some students reading 300-page books while others read a series of much shorter texts. As long as the level of text is challenging and students are using reading strategies to increase comprehension and drive analysis, then the length/genre/topic of the book doesn't need to be uniform.

4) Praising effort and learning from mistakes: One way to encourage all students to work at their highest level of productivity and intellectual capacity is to praise effort and not intelligence. Carol Dweck has published research on the benefits of this approach. She recommends teaching children the difference between a "growth mindset" (the belief that intelligence can be developed through effort and practice) and a "fixed mindset" (the belief that intelligence is innate). One way to develop students' "growth mindset" is to encourage them to risk making (and learning from) mistakes. Some students are afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed for it. We want to

turn that attitude on its head, helping them learn that, as Dweck says, we should instead "celebrate mistakes."

5) Using flexible grouping: Some confuse differentiation with the practice of grouping students by ability levels and teaching those small groups. While this is sometimes necessary and valuable, it is also important that students have the opportunity to participate in interest-based groups, mixed-ability groups, student-choice groups, and other variations. As differentiated-instruction expert Carol Ann Tomlinson has explained, "In a sense, the teacher is continually auditioning kids in different settings—and the students get to see how they can contribute in a variety of contexts."

Now, let's see what some other educators have to say about the best ways to assisting students with special needs.

Answer: Student Voice

Response from Michael Thornton, who has been teaching primary grades for seven years in and around the Charlottesville, Va., area. He blogs at mthornton78.

I believe the best way to promote equity for all learners is by allowing every student a voice in the classroom. Integrating student choice helps students become more invested in their learning and leads to self-motivation. In my opinion, these are the foundations that will help students with special needs be successful.

Students with learning disabilities need a platform to express their needs. Having a voice in the classroom is vital in helping them feel safe and confident. My students, no matter their academic ability or need, are creators. I want every student to drive his or her learning. Whether they are developing lessons for the class, creating presentations, or building their own textbooks, all my students are gaining confidence in their academic abilities. In addition, each learner is working on a level that is appropriate for him or her because the students are driving their own learning.

Students with attention differences need the opportunity to move in the classroom. Instead of trying to contain their energy, why not take advantage of it? Design lessons that keep the students active throughout the room. Allow them to choose a learning space so that they are comfortable and ready to learn. If movement is limited in the classroom, it is entirely possible that we are limiting learning potential.

The goal of the educator is to provide all learners with the greatest opportunity to succeed regardless of task or level of learner. Success is growth in academics, self-motivation, and relationship skills, and all of these things happen when responsibility is shared between the teacher and the learner.

Answer: Be Open to Change

Response from Gloria Lodato Wilson, who is the co-author of [Teaching in Tandem: Effective Co-Teaching in the Inclusive Classroom](). *She is an associate professor and the director of special education programs at Hofstra University in Long Island, N.Y.*

Here's my advice for helping students with special needs: TEST! TEST! And TEST some more!

Surprised that I'd be advocating that you test the students with special needs in your classroom? Actually, the TEST I'm talking about is an acronym emphasizing attention to four essential variables in teaching: Teacher, Environment, Student, and Task.

Teacher: Onerous as it may be, the first variable to look at is you, the teacher. It's always easy to explain away poor student performance on other causes, but teachers are the principle and most important component for student learning. In my decades of teaching, from preschool to graduate school, with typical and atypical students, when I reflected and adjusted my teaching, students learned more. So reflect, learn, and be open to change and trying new techniques and strategies.

Environment: I'm primarily talking about the teaching and learning environment but being respectful of diverse home environments is important, too, of course. The only environment that you can control, though, is your classroom. Besides making it safe, accepting, and inclusive, adhere to the tenets of Universal Design for Learning. Devise multiple means of presenting information, multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge, and multiple ways to engage students so they know that learning is worth the effort. Give students choices.

Students: Get to really know your students. Atypical students are usually defined by their disabilities, difficulties, and differences. But if you tap into your students' strengths and know their interests, you will discover astounding capabilities. In addition, investigate how your students learn and what impedes their learning. Are short-term memory deficits interfering with reading-recognition skills? Are poor metacognitive skills interfering with written expression skills? Are organization difficulties interfering with solving math word problems? This knowledge will help guide you to strategic teaching and learning activities.

Task: Be mindful of the tasks you assign. Often task difficulty level is overlooked. Examine the task or assignment and ask yourself how difficult it will be for a student with difficulties in reading recognition, reading comprehension, math computation, math applications, organization, or attention. You'll be surprised at how differently you will create tasks when you heighten your awareness of task difficulties with certain students in mind.

Answer: Creating Learning Spaces

Response from Ira David Socol, who is a "senior provocateur" with [Band of Educators]*, a group that consults with schools seeking to re-imagine education. He is the author of the novel* [The Drool Room]*.*

As I observe classrooms around the United States and the world, I find that they fall into one of two categories: "Training Places" or "Learning Spaces."

"Training Places" work against all kids who are out of the mythically defined "average." "Learning Spaces" create room for all children. It is really that simple.

A Learning Space is a conceptual and physical space that works to remove the barriers a Training Place builds. Breaking those barriers goes far beyond what special education typically concerns itself with (reading, writing, and arithmetic strategies and technologies), and includes removing the fixed elements of time, furniture, walls, curriculum, and content, as well as preconceptions about information and communications technologies.

In order to be successful citizens in a democratic society, all of our students must learn to master choice and the building of their "toolbelt." Kids with "special needs" in particular need to understand how to use their strengths as leverage to get around their weaknesses; they do not need to learn to be like others or to do things like others, rather they need to figure out their own ways, and then how to negotiate how those solutions meet with the solutions of others.

Learning Spaces encourage this, and by doing it for all students, they eliminate the biggest barrier to "special needs" success: the social barrier.

So break down the barriers. All of the barriers. It will create success for all.

Question 12: What are some ways to apply social-emotional learning in the classroom?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is sometimes also referred to as "character education." It's been receiving more and more attention recently, both from researchers and practitioners.

I'm a big believer in helping students develop strategies to strengthen their perseverance, self-control, intrinsic motivation, and healthy ways to deal with stress and conflict—among many other qualities—and I think it's fairly easy to integrate social-emotional lessons in literacy development.

I do have some questions about the push to develop official standards for social-emotional learning, though I suppose you could make a case that they are useful for pushing administrators to provide classroom time for such instruction.

I also think it's an awful idea to grade students on these character traits, a practice that some charter schools in particular have begun recently. It seems to me that we tend to "beat" enough intrinsic motivation out of our students with testing and grading now, and that carrots and sticks might not work very effectively if we're trying to help transform character. Instead, it seems to me that we should focus on encouragement and self-reflection, and help students see how developing these qualities is in their short- and long-term self-interest.

The experts I consulted on this question offer some great tips on ways to do this in the classroom.

Answer: Reinforcement Matters

Response from Maurice J. Elias, who is the co-author of [Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving: A Curriculum For Academic, Social And Emotional Learning: Grades 4-5](#). *She is a psychology professor at Rutgers University and director of the* [Rutgers Social-Emotional Learning Lab.](#)

The point of using lessons from social-emotional learning or social-emotional and character development (SEL/SECD) is to build a set of skills in children that will generalize without adult reminders. Formal lessons only serve to introduce the skills. Carrying out SEL/SECD lessons is not hard. But whether or not the skills are learned and generalized depends on the pedagogical procedure used and the subsequent reinforcement of skill use. Here are some tips for building any SEL/SECD competency effectively:

• Introduce the skill and/or concept and provide motivation for learning; discuss when the skill will and will not be useful.

• Break down the skill into its behavioral components, model them, and clarify with descriptions and behavioral examples of using and not using the skill.

• Provide opportunities for practice of the skill in "kid-tested," enjoyable activities, to allow for corrective feedback and reinforcement until skill mastery is approached.

• Label the skill with a prompt or cue to establish a shared language that can be used to call for the use of the skill in future situations to promote transfer and generalization. For example, in the social decision-making or social problem-solving curriculum, the skill of self-calming is taught in a teacher-based lesson and labeled with the prompt, "Keep Calm." When students hear that prompt, they are reminded to use a breathing and self-talk procedure they were taught in the curriculum. Anyone in a school building should know this prompt and use it in a situation to help students calm themselves down, such as before a test, a class presentation, or difficult social task. "Use Keep Calm" invokes the learned skill.

• Provide assignments for skill practice outside the structured lessons (e.g.,"Be sure to use 'Keep Calm' before your standardized tests next week").

• Provide follow-through activities and planned opportunities for using skill prompts in academic content areas, classroom management, and everyday interpersonal situations at school and in the home and community.

• Give occasional take-home activities or information sheets for parents so they can also recognize when skills are being used and/or prompt their use.

We have also found great benefit in concluding each SEL/SECD topic or set of related lessons with a reflective summary. The purpose of this is to allow students a chance to think about what they have learned from the topic, as well as to allow teachers or group leaders to see what students are taking away with them. Sometimes, the reflective summary can show when students have misunderstandings or uncertainty about what they have learned, suggesting the need for additional instructional activities before moving on in the lesson sequence. Here is the procedure that we use in grades 2 through 12:

Start by asking students to reflect on the question, "What did you learn from today's lesson/activity?" You can do this with the whole group, in a sharing circle, or related class meeting format, by having students fill out index cards, keep a reflection journal, or other formats as you choose. Use a variety in formats. After getting a sense of what the students learned, reinforce key themes that they mentioned and add perhaps one or two that you would like them to keep in mind. Also, discuss any follow-up assignments or take home materials.

Answer: Building Community

Response from Tom Roderick, who is executive director of [Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility](#), which implements social-emotional learning programs in schools. A

former teacher and school administrator, Roderick is the author of [A School of Our Own: Parents, Power, and Community at the East Harlem Block Schools](#).

We help teachers foster SEL in two ways: through building a classroom community based on respect every day of the week, and through weekly lessons aimed specifically at developing students' social and emotional skills. Here are community-building activities we like that are easy to do.

Name games are a good way to start off the year. Kids stand in a circle and toss a soft ball to each other. When a child catches the ball, the class shouts out the child's name. The game continues until everyone gets a shout-out.

Have a Heart dramatizes the importance of making the classroom a "put-down-free zone." With a construction paper heart taped to her chest, the teacher tells the story of a child who experiences put-downs throughout her day. At each put-down, the teacher tears a piece from the heart. After a brief discussion ("Have you ever had a day like this? How do put-downs make us feel?"), she retells the story. But this time the class substitutes put-ups for the put-downs.

Think Differently encourages students of all ages to engage in lively debate while acknowledging that we can disagree and still treat each other with respect. The teacher tapes a "Strongly Agree" sign on one side of the classroom and a "Strongly Disagree" sign on the other. The teacher makes a statement and students move to one sign or the other depending on whether they agree or disagree. If they're undecided, they stand in the middle. Statements can range from the trivial ("Vanilla ice cream is best") to the more serious ("Kids should only be allowed to watch one hour of TV per day" or "Slavery was the cause of the civil war"). The teacher asks students in each group to explain their view, and students change positions if they change their minds during the discussion. If the debate gets too heated, the teacher can ask students to paraphrase the opinion just expressed before putting out their own.

SEL activities are interactive, engaging, and fun for kids and adults—and they give students skills they can use for the rest of their lives.

Question 13: How can I connect with disengaged students?

I have received this question from teachers in a number of different forms. Often the words "apathetic" or "unmotivated" are used in place of "disengaged." But the point is the same. Many of us have had students in the classroom whose stubborn lack of interest or motivation threatens to undermine the positive learning environment we've tried to create. How do we turn this around?

I'd suggest that a first step in that direction is leading with our "ears" instead of our "mouths." The French root of the word "engage" means "to make a pledge." Perhaps we could make a pledge to listen to the interests, hopes, and dreams of our students and work at figuring out ways to make our lessons relevant to them. After all, everybody is interested in something—it just might not be exactly what we want them to be interested in. In many cases, we need to build some bridges to help get them there.

This is, in essence, the message I get from experts I asked to respond to this question as well.

Answer: Walk-and-Talks

Response from Jim Peterson, who is a veteran vice principal at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif. Jim is also a behavioral therapist and clinical hypnotherapist and runs a site called [Alpha Mind Coaching](). Who better to talk about connecting with disengaged students?

Good teacher mechanics take care of a high percentage of challenges in the classroom. Being prepared each day with well thought-out lessons, including good instructional and management strategies, will ensure that most of your students stay engaged. A good net, however, won't ensure that you catch every fish in the pond.

Relationships are another piece of the puzzle. How well do you know the student who is not engaging? What's her story? How does she see the world? Understanding and connecting with a child at a deeper level changes the teacher-student dynamic. With all other factors being equal, a student will perform more for the teacher she feels a connection with.

One way to accomplish this is by doing "walk-and-talk's" during your prep period. Walking side-by-side with another person is an extremely powerful rapport-building exercise. It gives you an opportunity to connect with the student in a way that you wouldn't be able to in the classroom. When you take a short, relaxed walk with a student who is frustrated or upset, the student experiences a progression toward a better-feeling state. On a subconscious level, the student associates this positive feeling with your presence.

During the walk-and-talk, you and the student agree upon an area of focus. If the student has done nothing in your class up to this point, discussing everything he needs to do to earn an A can be overwhelming. Staying on task during an entire five-minute assignment, in a class where he normally does nothing, though not your ultimate performance goal, should be recognized and

validated as a success. Success breeds success. Highly motivated students are a product of more successes than failures. Even small victories can lead to a self-image, at some level, of being successful.

Walk-and-talks provide an opportunity to help the student begin to create this image. The yet-to-be-successful student is not, by himself, going to plant the seed in his own mind that he can be successful. He needs your help. Trying to establish this idea with a recalcitrant student, however, can be like throwing the seed onto hardpan. When you establish a relationship with this student, you plow through the hardpan, allowing the seed to take root. We are more easily influenced by those we trust and feel we resonate with.

Walk-and-talks allow you not only to build a positive relationships, they give you the opportunity to guide your students in painting, stroke by stroke, a picture of themselves as being successful. The dual motivators of a personal relationship and a budding sense of self-efficacy are a powerful combination that can energize even the most unmotivated student.

Answer: Create Meaning

Response from Mike Anderson, who is a Milken Educator Award winner and a consultant for the Northeast Foundation for Children, a nonprofit organization that supports teachers in implementing [Responsive Classroom](#) teaching practices. He is the author of several books about teaching and learning, including the [The Well-Balanced Teacher](#).

Of all of the different challenging behaviors that children exhibit, I find disengagement the most frustrating. After working so hard to create lessons and units that will help students learn, I feel like a failure when students don't try. Here are a few ideas we might consider when challenged with a student who won't engage:

Make sure work is purposeful: "Why do we have to learn this?" groans a student, staring at his worksheet of fraction problems. In my experience, we most dread this question when we don't have a good answer (like "because it's on the state test" or "because you're getting a grade for this"). What if we challenge our students to ask us this question more often? It might force us to make sure that work is meaningful from students' perspectives. For example, we might create a class bulletin board of cool fractional designs. The work students do with fractions can be about creating an amazing display in the hallway—much more purposeful than practicing a skill for a state test.

Make work more collaborative: People learn more together than they do apart. We're a social species and we're hard-wired to collaborate. So why do we so often require kids to work alone in school? I know that I'm more engaged with my work when I'm collaborating with colleagues. Partner chats, games to practice skills, and allowing students to work on an assignment together are simple ways we can leverage students' need to work together.

Offer choices about how or what students learn: When students have more power and control over their learning, they are more engaged. Even the simple choice between using dice or cards when playing a math game can make a difference.

Make sure learning is fun: Put yourself in your students' shoes. If you were a student doing the work you were assigning, would you like it? Would it be interesting? Would it be fun? Try building lessons and activities from the perspectives of your students. You might find yourself inventing games, creating class debates, or making music videos with your students.

Most of all, we need to not give up. Students want to learn. They want to engage. Students who put up the façade of boredom or apathy are usually disengaging for good reasons, so it's up to us to keep working with them to find ways to get them fired up and excited about learning.

Question 14: Can teachers be friends with students?

This is an important question with respect to instructional effectiveness since it brings up issues related to engagement, barriers, comportment, and respect—all key elements in teacher-student relationships. The question is also increasingly on teachers' minds because of the rise of the social-media culture.

I was a community organizer for 19 years prior to becoming a teacher 10 years ago. One of the many organizing lessons I learned during that time and that I've tried to apply to teaching is the difference between public and private relationships.

This is not an either/or perspective, and clearly must be more nuanced in an environment like a classroom. Nevertheless, keeping it in mind has helped me maintain more of a personal/professional "equilibrium" and helped my students learn important life lessons.

Organizers believe that private relationships usually encompass our family and friends, where our imperfections tend to be accepted. We generally have these relationships on an "as is" basis. We expect not to be judged, and we expect loyalty—love in a broad sense is the "currency."

Public relationships encompass everyone else. Reciprocity is the "currency." We expect respect and gain it by being accountable for our actions. Loyalty is generated through reciprocity—a *quid pro quo*.

Ed Chambers is the long-time director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, the group I worked for during most of my organizing career. He says that private relationships are "unconventional promises of mutual commitment," whereas public relationships are the "world of exchange, compromise and deals—the world of contracts, transactions, and the law."

Organizers believe it is not uncommon for people with power in our society to try to blur these two realms for their own purposes. Advertising techniques—including slogans like "reach out and touch someone"—and the typical gesture of a politician kissing a baby are just two obvious examples.

The bottom line, then, is that *I view the teacher/student relationship as a public one—a caring one, a relationship that requires great patience and understanding—but, nevertheless, a public one*.

Here's an example of how this approach has informed my work in the classroom. One year, I had a student with an enormous number of challenges. I put a great deal of time and energy into supporting him, including purchasing books of his own choosing for him to read, working with him to develop alternative assignments that would be more fun and accessible, and providing occasional snacks between classes. He made great progress during the first six weeks of the school year, and was a delight to have in class. However, things began to go downhill dramatically at that point. One day—after he said something like "You don't care about me and you just want to kick me out of class!"—I asked him to go outside with me so we could have a private talk.

This is what I said to him in a calm voice:

"I felt hurt by what you said. I feel like I've bent over backward to support you and help you succeed. (I then gave examples.) I don't need thanks, but I expect respect. And I haven't been feeling very respected by you over the past few weeks. I will be a helpful and supportive teacher to you, as I am with all the students in my class. But I don't feel like continuing to go the extra mile for someone who doesn't show me respect. I want to emphasize that I will be a helpful and supportive teacher to you, but I'm just not going to continue to go the extra mile."

He began to react negatively, but I quickly ended the conversation and we returned to class. Afterwards, however, the student returned to being respectful and hardworking, and I returned to "going the extra mile." He ended up having a very successful year.

As I've emphasized, my approach is informed by my own professional background. Let's see how some other educators respond to the question of whether teachers and students can—or should—be friends.

Answer: Adult Perspective

Response from Rick Wormel: His reflections on teaching and learning—shared though his books, articles, and workshops—have influenced many educators throughout the world, including me. Here's his thoughtful response to the question of whether teachers and students should be friends:

I used to think teachers could be friends with their students, but then I realized I was confusing "friend" with "friendly." We can grow closer to students when we share a common interest or work on long-term projects, but in every interaction, we must remain teacher/student, mentor/mentee, not true friend, and this is wise.

In adult friendships, age differences do not matter, whether we're designing new instructional programs, hiking mountain trails, or performing together in the same community orchestra. Adult friends have equal power to retain personal identity and shape the course of the friendship, including its dissolution, if necessary. School children, however, don't have that equal influence on growing relationships, and they are vulnerable. Adults are in positions of authority, and this creates greater influence on children than it does on other adults.

We have to look for balance between what to cultivate and what to limit in teacher-student relations. There are boundaries, yet we want to be inviting to students and make sure they know they are good company. For as long as the child is a minor, however, it's not the same as friendships we enjoy with adults. Teachers and students can share an equal interest in local sports teams, for example, trading team updates, re-telling great moments in legendary games, and showing souvenirs to each other. These are acts of human connection that are valuable to both parties. Students mature when adults extend these connections, and teachers enjoy the camaraderie and seeing students as more than one more paper to grade.

Notice, though, that the teacher does not take the student out for coffee and vent about office politics. There are topics that are inappropriate for teachers to share with students, and such sharing can undermine learning relationships in the classroom, even when the teacher is already very familiar with the student and his family.

There are other dynamics at work, too. The clinical social worker Michelle Selby once told me that a teacher disclosing personal information with a student can be helpful when it is to help that student understand something, but never when it is for the purpose of adults filling their own needs, such as when seeking friendship or approval. Her husband, educator Monte Selby, added, "A health teacher can help kids learn about human sexuality, but it is not appropriate for the same teacher to tell kids which student looks sexy or share intimate details of their own sexuality. Those efforts are attempts to fill adult needs, not support student learning."

While a friend might call us in the middle of the night when something upsets him or her, the teacher who receives such a call from a student must remain the concerned mentor. He should call the child's parents, health officials, a school counselor, or Child Protective Services after the call, if warranted. In other words, our adult responsibility for the welfare of the child supersedes any element of friendship forged.

Some teachers dress and act like their students in an effort to ingratiate themselves with students. The opposite happens, however. Students prefer teachers to be adults, not overgrown versions of themselves. Students gravitate toward teachers who inspire them to become something more than they are today, not extensions of their current condition. Sure, teachers clown around from time to time, but the better teachers remain clearly adults, facilitating learning, offering insight, and representing larger society as students try on new vocabulary, behaviors, fashions, and politics, always watching how we respond.

Teachers and students share small parts of life's journey with one another every day. If they find something in common, are thoughtful toward one another, and through extended time, develop trust beyond that of mere acquaintances, they can't help but become friendly with one another, and this is a good thing. As professionals, we still grade these students without bias, discipline them if they misbehave, and put them in positions of responsibility just as fairly as we ever did before. If they ask intimate questions, we let them know they crossed a line and let them apologize.

I am a better person for having been influenced by the strong character and insight of some of my students over the years. When they became adults, a few of them moved into my circle of good friends. With Facebook turning the word "friend" into a superficial commodity these days, true friendship seems diminished and uncertain. In an increasingly connected world, we can't afford a policy of, "Teachers may never be friendly with students," but we can help teachers and students recognize clear boundaries rightfully established in successful teaching-learning relationships.

We forget sometimes that, while different from an adult friendship, the teacher-student relationship is not a lesser connection. It is often more meaningful and special, with tremendous

value to both parties. We try to live up to its promise for the short time we have with our students. A friend taught me this.

Answer: Professional Distance Online

Response from [Bud Hunt](), who is a former English teacher and an instructional technologist for the St. Vrain Valley School District in northern Colorado. This response, which is excerpted with permission from a longer post he wrote for the [Powerful Learning Practice blog](), more directly addresses the social media aspect of the question on whether students and teachers can be friends:

One of my favorite teachers told me once that he dressed the way that he did—jackets, ties, and other business attire—because he wanted us to know that, while he was our teacher, he was not our friend.

And I thought that made sense. It was his job to advocate for us. To challenge us. To help us be the best we could be. And so he wasn't our friend. He was our teacher. To keep those ideas separate, he used his clothes. I think that's worth remembering as we move more and more of our work as teachers into online spaces.

One of our many jobs as teachers is to keep a professional separation between who we are and what we do. When we are doing our best, we are presenting ourselves in a manner that helps to manage that professional distance in thoughtful and productive ways. In social networks, this looks like being present, being thoughtful, and being intentional in the ways that we use those spaces to promote what we think is essential—ways that do not confuse our teacher persona and our friend persona and that help our students understand the difference between the two.

I made a choice as I moved forward in working with and building online spaces for teaching and learning that I wouldn't "friend" current students on Facebook. My wife, a high school language arts teacher, has adopted a rule that I think is a fine standard. She does not friend students until they graduate from high school.

At the same time, Facebook is not her primary online space for interacting with students. She has created course spaces where students and she engage in course-related conversation and content. And she maintains a professional presence in her personal Facebook account. That's a good thing. Graduates who choose to continue the relationship past their time in high school find much the same person that they found in the classroom. And those students talk with her, mostly, about the same things that they would have in their school spaces.

She is never not a teacher, though.

I'd encourage you to do the same. Wherever you are as a person and as a professional, you are still a teacher. It's a high calling that we've gone after. Whenever and wherever you are, seek to

model the best of your professional and personal self. Keep a sense of professional distance. Keep a professional persona.

Professional distance doesn't mean be a heartless, soulless automaton. Certainly, care and love and concern for the young people in our work are paramount. But it does mean be intentional and purposeful about the ways that you present yourself, wherever you may happen to be.

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