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When School is Back in Session, Where Will We Begin?

By Thomas R. Guskey

When schools reopen, educators should focus less on what students know and more on the success skills students need.

The question that most troubles teachers and school leaders as they look forward to the next school year, whatever form that may take, is "How will we know what our students know?" Inequitable access to learning opportunities during the final months of the past school year largely due to school moving solely online, with little preparation for the change — created huge differences in the knowledge and skills students will have when schools eventually reopen. Combining this disparity with the usual loss in achievement during summer that many students experience compounds the instructional challenge.

Testing Companies' Altruism Isn't the Answer

To solve this problem, several testing companies have offered their assessments free to school districts so teachers can establish a baseline for students' performance from which to plan for the coming year. Although seemingly altruistic, this is likely simply a clever business strategy. If a school district agrees to use a particular company's assessments to establish a baseline for students, how will they judge improvement or progress? The district will have to buy more of that company's assessments to do so, because each company's assessments measure different skills in different ways. It's the same strategy printer companies use when they offer printers to customers at little or no cost, but then charge huge fees for the ink cartridges needed to operate the printers.

Furthermore, what guarantee do school districts have that the assessments offered are aligned with their curriculum? Independent validity studies show that most commercially available assessments align poorly with state curriculums, and reviews conducted by the testing companies generally exaggerate alignment claims (Polikoff, Porter, & Smithson, 2011).

ASK WHAT STUDENTS NEED–AND GUIDE THEM TO MASTERY

A better way to address this problem may be to reframe the question. Instead of asking "How will we know what our students know?" it could be more productive to ask, "What do our students need?" Let's admit that we can't do everything and focus more narrowly on what will best help students succeed.

Answering this question requires teachers to identify the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need to be successful in the initial instructional units of the coming school year. In other words, rather than considering all the things students may have missed, teachers focus only on what is essential for students' success in those earliest units. Leaders should then help teacher teams develop short diagnostic assessments to measure that prerequisite knowledge and skills, drawing on teachers' knowledge of state standards. This shouldn't take much time and could be seen as a natural part of teachers' planning for the coming year. In most cases, these diagnostic assessments will be short quizzes students complete in class to provide teachers with targeted feedback on where each student stands. Teachers might draw on different resources in developing these assessments and district assessment experts could offer assistance when needed. Because these will be low-stakes assessments, they don't have to be psychometrically perfect.

Finally, school and teacher leaders need to guide teachers in using the first two to three weeks of the new school year to teach the identified prerequisite knowledge and skills in a mastery learning format, bringing all students to a specified mastery level. In a mastery learning format, students who lack the prerequisites are taught that knowledge and related skills directly, with regular feedback on their learning progress.

Those who initially struggle with content are given individualized corrective assistance to help remedy their learning difficulties. Students who demonstrate early in the process that they've acquired the prerequisite knowledge and skills can engage in self-selected enrichment activities to extend their learning–so they broaden and deepen their understanding during this time rather than simply "move ahead." Or these students might serve as tutors for their classmates, strengthening their own comprehension while enhancing collaboration and interpersonal skills.

Advantages–including the Sweet Smell of Success

Focusing on the prerequisite knowledge and skills offers several distinct advantages:

- The approach narrows the scope of learning goals teachers must consider at this critical time of the school year. Teachers can concentrate their efforts on what students most need to experience success.
- It provides students with a learning foundation that helps level the playing field and counter past inequities. Mastering the prerequisite knowledge and skills ensures students are well prepared and can begin the new year on par with their classmates, rather than having to dig themselves out of a hole.
- Students who learn prerequisite knowledge and skills well are more likely to start the school year with a feeling of success–the most powerful motivator available to teachers. Students who experience learning success feel more confident of themselves in future learning situations, more motivated to take on additional learning tasks, and more in control of their learning trajectory.
- Finally, and most importantly, mastering prerequisite knowledge and skills has enduring effects. Strong research evidence indicates that bringing students to a mastery level on prerequisite knowledge and skills results in a 20 percent improvement in their scores on end-of-course summative assessments (Leyton, 1983). Students who master prerequisite knowledge and skills and succeed in early instructional units have the requisites for meeting or exceeding expectations in later units. This helps eliminate achievement gaps brought on by inequities in pervious learning opportunities–or from summer learning loss.

Schools face enormous challenges in planning for the next school year—and don't have much time to get ready. Our plans must be thoughtful, efficient, and designed to yield the greatest benefits possible for all students. Making our goal to help students master the prerequisite knowledge and skills needed for success in initial instructional units will bring focus to our efforts, help shrink learning gaps, and potentially yield important payoffs for students and teachers alike.

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Online Learning in the Era of COVID-19

By Lindsay Marczak

I n Spring 2020, American K–12 schools closed to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus—disrupting the learning of more than 50.8 million U.S. public school students. In response to the crisis, educators valiantly transitioned at warp speed to emergency remote teaching. Nonetheless, research shows that the negative impact of school closures on student achievement is likely to be substantial. A forecast from Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform shows that, relative to a regular school year, students are likely to return to school in fall 2020 with approximately 63 to 68 percent of the learning gains in reading and with 37 to 50 percent of the learning gains in math they would have seen otherwise (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). McKinsey & Company predict that the achievement gaps between white students and low-income students as well as between white students and those with black and Hispanic students are expected to widen by 20 percent (Dorn et al., 2020).

As schools begin preparing to roll out online and blended learning initiatives for the 2020–2021 school year, they must not only combat COVID-19 learning loss but also find new ways to accelerate student achievement. Research supports the conclusion that students can learn just as well from online instruction as from traditional classes (Cavanaugh, 2013). However, just connecting a student to a virtual Zoom presentation will not prepare them for the critical thinking needed for college and careers. To achieve the best possible learning outcomes for students, online instruction needs to be grounded in well-accepted research. The following paper identifies eight best practices for online instruction in the time of COVID-19.

Best Practice #1: Prioritize Content Standards and Focus on Depth, Not Breadth
Every year, educators are challenged to cover an overwhelming number of standards—with some states requiring teachers to address more than 90 content standards in a single grade level. Time has always been a scarce commodity for teachers, but with the projected COVID-19

learning loss, educators won't have the luxury of filling all the gaps in learning from the prior academic year (Council of Great City Schools, 2020). There just simply is not enough time. To be successful, teachers must be able to provide engaging, targeted instruction that meets students where they are and quickly gets them to where they need to be. Educators need to work together to identify essential standards based on endurance, leverage, readiness for next level learning, and external exam requirements (Ainsworth, 2013, p. 25-27).

Best Practice #2: Don't Assume Digital Natives Are Digital Learners

While today's students have grown up with technology, they don't become digital learners automatically. Research shows that to be successful in an online environment, students need strong self-regulation strategies—skills such as the ability to focus their attention, set goals, remember instructions, and monitor their thinking (Azevedo, 2005; Winters et al., 2008). Yet many students have never been systematically taught these strategies. In an online environment, educators must not only explain how to use digital tools but also teach students how to regulate their thinking processes and schedule while learning (Mayer, 2011, National Research Council, 2012). To maximize student success, teachers should model how to focus and refocus their attention while participating in online learning. Games like Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes and Simon Says help students build concentration stamina.

Best Practice #3: Give Precedence to the Science of Learning and Make Instruction Accessible

A common theme in online efficacy research is that technology is only as good as the quality of instruction that fuels it (Means et al., 2010; Cavanaugh, 2013; Mayer, 2018; Reilly, 2020). As Mohammed (2019) points out, "[W]hen technology is integrated into lessons in ways that are aligned with good in-person teaching pedagogy, learning can be better than without technology" (para. 3). All too often, however, technology is used "to amplify ineffective strategies that would never be used in-person classrooms" (para. 6). To ensure that online instruction is effective, teachers must give precedence to the science of learning and teaching.

Research supports engaging students in deep learning or "the process through which an individual becomes capable of taking what was learned in one situation and applying it to new situations" (National Research Council, 2012, p. 5). When students have learned deeply, they have both content knowledge and an understanding of "how, why, and when to apply this knowledge to answer questions and solve problems" (National Research Council, 2012, p. 4). This entails connecting new information to known information; engaging in higher-order thinking processes such as analysis, evaluation, and creation (Krathwohl, 2002; Mayer, 2002); articulating processes of thinking; identifying patterns and relationships; generating and testing hypotheses; and understanding the general principles underlying specific facts, concepts, and examples (National Research Council, 2012). Effective online instruction should move beyond rote, "drill and kill" lectures and exercises. Instruction should provide meaningful practice opportunities.

Research suggests that instruction should be aligned

with how the brain works. To learn, information must be transferred from working memory (where information is consciously processed) to long-term memory (where it can be stored and later retrieved) (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974; Baddeley, 1986). The challenge, however, is that working memory can process only seven pieces of information at a time (Miller, 1956). And research shows that students can only concentrate on one task for two to five minutes per each year old. Consequently, experts suggest information should be taught in small segments (Sweller, 2008). Long synchronous or asynchronous lectures are not only dull to students but also do not facilitate learning.

Educators need to pay attention to the format of their online courses. Data indicate that students can grasp complex knowledge more effectively when information is presented in a variety of multisensory formats (e.g., video, graphic displays, audio, simulations), and when critical content can be manipulated by the student (Beesley & Apthorp, 2010; CAST, 2011; Reilly, 2020). Further, more than three decades of research from Richard Mayer (2018) show that effective multimedia instruction

should eliminate extraneous content, capitalize on scaffolds that help students process information, and include features that motivate a student to make sense of the material. This means avoiding redundant information (such as placing onscreen text with narrated graphics) and highlighting essential information for students (such as placing onscreen text close to graphics or using audio to call out the critical elements of graphics) (Mayer, 2018).

Best Practice #4: Prioritize Students' Social and Developmental Needs

In his seminal work, A Theory of Human Motivation, Abraham Maslow (1943) noted that humans must have their basic needs (physiological and safety) and psychological needs (esteem and belongingness) met before they can really advance cognitively. Since students and teachers are physically distant in an online environment,

educators must work harder to build student trust, create a sense of belonging, and boost student confidence. Teachers need to build relationships with students proactively—they need to ask students about past educational experiences, academic challenges, and hopes. Creating an online teacher presence is not only critical to building students' social and developmental needs, but is also the catalyst for making students accountable and invested in their work.

Students' academic and emotional development and growth becomes more nuanced with a child's age and abilities. In elementary school, learners are just starting to build the neural connections needed to remember and store rote academic facts, and are learning to identify emotions and control impulses (Semrud-Clikeman, 2014). In middle school, neural connections increase, and inferential thinking becomes more prominent (Denham, 2018). Throughout high school, students make significant gains in abstract reasoning and exhibit improved social cognition, but prioritize risk-taking over self-regulation (Williamson et al., 2015).

Educators need to acknowledge that students' developmental

levels influence learning readiness (Semrud-Clikeman, 2014). If there is a mismatch between instructional materials and age, a student will not learn effectively. Because elementary, middle, and high school students' needs vary, experts agree that instruction should be developmentally appropriate. For example, in the early elementary grades, education should include engaging interactive digital games, lots of animation, and real-world examples. In high school, learners will excel when presented with learning opportunities where they can learn through trial and error, while maintaining regular supervision.

Best Practice #5: Make Learning Relevant and Engaging

Student engagement is, generally, "the extent to which students actively engage by thinking, talking, and interacting with the content of a course, the other students in the course, and the instructor" (Dixson, 2015, p. 2). Research shows that student engagement is highly correlated with academic achievement, better high school graduation rates, and lower dropout rates (Kuh, 2009). It is particularly important in online environments, where students are physically isolated from their teachers (Dixson, 2015). The more students engage with academic content, the more comfortable they become at discussing the subject matter with teachers in order to receive coaching and instruction.

One well-supported method of fostering student engagement is through online collaborative learning activities that make students feel more connected to one another and to the online course. These include activities that involve students in informal discussions or working on group projects. Data indicate that exposing students to collaborative learning can improve creative thinking, reflection, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Goodyear et al.,

2014). Studies show that online collaborative learning activities can produce more substantial achievement outcomes than when students work individually (Johnson & Johnson, 2008; Robertson & Riggs, 2018). Teachers can promote online collaboration by capitalizing on group assignments through video breakout rooms, online class collaboration discussion boards, jigsaws, and group learning simulations (Reilly, 2020).

Studies indicate that educators can play a direct role in fostering student engagement by establishing a teaching presence, capturing student attention at the start of the course, and engaging students in challenging, authentic, real-world tasks (Jeffrey et al., 2012). Students will be more invested and accountable in school when they believe a teacher cares about their work. It is critical that teachers and other staff members develop relationships with students. In addition, no student wants to hear a teacher drone on about a topic that is unimportant to them. Students also need to understand how their coursework is related to their lives, or else they will quickly lose interest. Perhaps most importantly, students will be less engaged when they are given tasks far above or below their instructional level.

Research also shows that adding game-based elements to online instruction can facilitate student motivation and engagement, promote interaction and socialization, and provide opportunities to build executive function (Zainuddin et al., 2020). As Hamari et al. (2016) point out, "[P]layers are motivated to learn, in part because learning is situated and occurs through a process of hypothesizing, probing, and reflecting upon the simulated world within the game. In addition, the goals are clear, and information becomes available to players at just the time that it is needed to reach each goal. Making sense of that information becomes a goal intrinsic to gameplay"

(p. 170). When possible, educators can strategically select curriculum with games and simulations to facilitate learning.

Best Practice #6: Elevate and Empower Teachers to Differentiate Instruction

Because every child learns differently and has different abilities and interests, research confirms that effective instruction should be differentiated according to students' unique learning need and on their interest, readiness, and profile (Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014). Teachers therefore need to be empowered to differentiate instruction (Subban, 2006).

All too often, however, online educators rely too heavily on whole-class group online lessons or independent work, "which can be both isolating and engaging for learners" (Reilly, 2020 p. 1). Whole-group instruction should be used to introduce critical concepts or common misconceptions. Still, educators and administrators should prioritize using digital technology to set up small-group or one-on-one instruction to make sure students receive the remediation, challenge, or support needed to master complicated subject matter.

To truly differentiate instruction, teachers must provide explanatory and timely feedback to students, ensuring that students will learn from both their successes and setbacks (Jeffrey et al., 2012). The ability to provide feedback is contingent on having access to data on real-time progress, engagement, and achievement. Using this data, teachers need to set learning goals with students, check for understanding, and consistently monitor progress (Jeffrey et al., 2012).

Best Practice #7: Connect, Communicate, and Capitalize on Caregivers

Research has shown that the involvement of a responsible adult, typically a parent, is critical to the success of online learners (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). In remote learning environments, caregivers are often the ones who are monitoring student learning. Caregivers can only help students to take ownership of learning if they know what tools students should be using and how they should engage with them. Through short e-mails, texts, or phone calls, educators should provide resources to parents who may not be familiar with content material. Arming parents with strategies to engage students can help both parents and students feel more connected.

Best Practice #8: Don't Leave Online Learning to Chance

Experts and practitioners of online learning agree that implementing technology initiatives is not a spectator sport. As the U.S. Department of Education notes in the 2016 National Education Technology Plan, "[L]eaders need to create a shared vision for how technology best can meet the needs of all learners and to develop a plan that translates the vision into action" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 3). Implementation quality is determined in large part by stakeholder buy-in, whether it is building out technological capacity and infrastructure, developing a clear model and vision for instruction to ensure more in-depth learning, or making available the necessary professional development to implement differentiated instruction (Horn & Staker, 2015). Research also shows that when teachers buy in and embrace technology in their classrooms, the success rate of these programs increases (Hew & Bush, 2007).

Proper professional development is critical to help educators adopt new technology and pedagogies. Teachers will need to learn how to:

- establish academic and behavioral rules, roles, and responsibilities for all students;
- promote deeper learning that allows students to apply known knowledge to new situations;
- design strategies for unexpected situations;
- set and monitor student usage;
- communicate with parents;
- define the conditions under which students will receive whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one instruction;
- establish standards for acceptable and unacceptable work;
- define the behaviors that will and will not be tolerated; and
- articulate the support that is available and under what conditions students can obtain it.

Steve Case once said, "A vision without the ability to execute is just a hallucination." With thoughtful consideration, administrators, school leaders, educators, and caregivers can partner to give these evidence-based best practices a vision and a dynamic plan to execute them. COVID-19 may offer unprecedented educational challenges, but it also presents an unparalleled opportunity to reshape student learning.

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The Influence of Generation Z Learners

By Dalane E. Bouillion, Ed.D.

Each of us is motivated by something, and we all have our own interests, including students who bring their unique proclivities to the classroom. Meaningful learning depends on how effectively educators tap into students' motivations. Today, regardless of the motivations they bring, students generally requirwe an active learning environment. They like to see, touch, listen and move repeatedly; they require these things simultaneously. They like to be visually stimulated by the videos that inform them of every topic imaginable as they hold and manipulate their

Photo credit: Jo Duran

personal technology device of choice while reclining on flexible furniture. They expect immediate feedback. They are comfortable learning by discovering their environment and participating, not just by sitting and listening. 'They' are Generation Z and we have been graduating them from high schools for a few years. Their parents are generally Gen Xers, who had to contemplate the best age to buy their child's first phone. Was fifth grade too early or too late? Did they really need independence that soon? What they would seek and find on the internet educated both the child and the parent. Gen Z students are now spread throughout middle schools, high schools, and colleges. As a society, they

are changing the way we shop, and they expect everything to be delivered. Research has informed us that the plasticity in the brain has changed with our younger generation, and meeting the needs of the learner now requires a unique approach in the classroom. It has been proven; they really are different! Gone are the days of lectures and note-taking. Students are comfortable responding to their environment, and socialization is critical to their development. Now, students gather at Starbucks to complete projects. Homework time has been redefined so that collaboration and technological stimulation can be achieved.

What does all of this mean for education? Pedagogy is evolving to allow for student choice and creativity. Generation Z led the way, informing educators that the approach had to change. Some students still find lecture note-taking pleasing, but generally the way to tap into a student's motivation is to present the material in a variety of ways: by another student, or with a tactile opportunity to make better sense of curricula. All of this, coupled with ever evolving technology advancements, make it extremely important to understand how to support learning behaviors. They watch YouTube videos and are comfortable with their own presence in every corner of our universe. They are aware of concepts

of sustainability, and they recycle. Most importantly, they require us to respond.

Sure, instructional changes in the classroom are critical to the development of students, but what about other aspects of the learning environment? What does this mean for the built environment? The best designs resulted from a process where architects were forced to think about the spaces in which students learn (Bouillion, Oliveras-Ortiz, & Asbury, 2019; Oliveras-Ortiz, Bouillion, & Asbury, in press).

Teachers need the space to adequately support student learning in classrooms. This doesn't necessarily mean large space. Rather, it requires purposefully designed space that allows for evolving instructional methodologies and flexible grouping of student sizes in order to foster independent work, partner work, and groups large and small (Oliveras-Ortiz, Bouillion, & Asbury, in press). Teachers need designed space to allow for instructional options such as collaboration, flexibility, and an extension of the learning environment, which may also require the inclusion of transparency to ensure supervision throughout instruction.

Remember the traditional desk? In so many instances, a reiteration of it still exists in most classrooms, and too many times they are still arranged in rows, all facing the teacher, and allowing for little student-to-student collaboration (Oliveras-Ortiz, Bouillion, & Asbury, in press). Students need to be a part of reconfiguring the classroom space with furniture that moves with them depending on their

research needs, levels of collaboration required, and floor space.

Photo credit: Jo Duran

Expectations for integrated curricula and an inquiry-based instructional approach demand a learning environment that is conducive for students, their materials, and their projects. For example, in a Project-based Learning experience launch, it is important for all students to hear and experience the same expectations from the teacher. However, the need for large group instructional space is minimal until the end of the project. Much of what we expect students to employ at the end of a curricular unit is the ability to present what was learned. In this case, students need a venue for both informal and formal presentations. How will those projects be displayed? Are they physical models, electronic presentations, or lectures? Perhaps it's a skit, a song, or a musical production. We must think about space differently, and provide both the flexibility and the resources for students to make the best choices about their own project solutions.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. Dalane E. Bouillion has spent her career committed to public education, and knew she wanted to be a teacher in the first grade. She received all three of her educational degrees from Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Her 23 year public education career began as a second grade teacher in Galena Park ISD. She also served the district as an assistant principal and principal. She then served Spring ISD as the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. In 2015, Dalane had an opportunity to bring her educational experience to the private sector, becoming a member of the design team at VLK Architects. Dalane now enjoys the ability to impact learning from a design side, creating ideal learning environments for students and teachers as she engages them in the planning process for their future facilities. She is driven by authentic student engagement, and believes we have the responsibility to make decisions in the best interest of students in order to perpetuate our democracy. Dalane serves on the Board of Directors for Friends of Texas Public Schools. VLK Architects supports Dalane's belief in Friends of Texas Public Schools, and allows her needed time to volunteer for the worthwhile efforts they leverage on behalf of the public education vocation. She also serves as an Adjunct Professor at The University of Texas at Tyler.

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A Positive Classroom Climate, Even from a Distance

Small gestures of connection may be more challenging to replicate in the online environment, but that doesn't mean educators can't still create a caring community with students during remote learning hours.

By Nancy Frey, Dominique Smith, and Douglas Fisher

Our teaching lives changed substantially as schools rapidly moved to online and distance learning formats. Many of the rituals caring educators have relied on suddenly became impossible. The warm handshake at the classroom door, the encouraging hand on the shoulder of a student who is working through a problem—these small gestures, as well as the other rituals we have embedded into our classrooms, don't all travel well.

The positive climate of the classroom and school fuels student learning. We sometimes hear the terms school culture and school climate used interchangeably. Our working definition is that the school culture comprises the rules, norms, and procedures that govern the classroom. But school climate is essentially how it feels to be part of the classroom community. It is students' perception that matters, regardless of what we say we are (or are not) doing.

In fact, whole-school efforts to positively affect school climate have promising results on student learning and achievement (Daily et al., 2020). Much of the school climate data out there focus on school connectedness—a sense of belonging and closeness with peers and adults. But how can this happen at a distance? We're learning along with you about how to foster a positive school climate from afar.

Reach Out to Families

Families have always been important to school connectedness, and we are finding out just how vital they are. The caregivers who oversee their children's education at home are on the frontlines. In many ways, they are a proxy for what we try to achieve at school. Dissatisfied families communicate their distress to their children and can negatively affect school connectedness.

Schools can set up ways to assist families with everything from access to technology to enrichment activities. Provide families with multiple pathways to check in with you to discuss what is working well for them and what needs to be improved. We are used to having a lot of control over the learning environment, but now you are managing 30 or more separate settings. One household may be juggling the competing demands of preschool children and a parent trying to work from home herself. Another family may be discovering that schedules and a limited number of devices are making it impossible for families with multiple children to work together. Don't become the divisive wedge between students and their families. Seek the adults' feedback, work actively to adjust, and thank them again and again for all they are doing.

Provide Personalized Touchpoints

Don't forget the power of using a student's name. In online environments, say their names even more often than you usually do. People of all ages respond positively when they are directly addressed. Smile more often, add a sparkle to your voice, and ramp up your gestures and movements. Whether you are teaching through livestreaming or recording messages, a bit more animation in your delivery can increase engagement.

Personalized touchpoints extend to paper packets, too. Add a short note on a sticky addressed to each student, with some personal knowledge of their interests. Consider putting an item in the packet and adding a note saying you thought they would like this because they "know so much about frogs" or because they "love books about dragons." This approach continues what you have always done, which is to provide lessons based on what you know about them as individuals.

Avoid loading students up with mindless worksheets. Can we please just say once and for all that word searches don't appear anywhere in the standards? Though students need to practice skills and concepts, they don't need rote learning. Effective practice is deliberate practice, which is to say that it needs to stretch their thinking. Challenge students to think mathematically by providing them with fewer problems but asking them to solve in in two different ways. Turn skills worksheets into games by asking them to record their "personal best" time.

Because you're not present to regulate their efforts, some children may encounter frustration with a task and leave learning behind. Families, on the other hand, may think that the task needs to be completed at all costs. Adding a time limit on tasks (like

a note that says, "This activity should not go beyond 15 minutes") allow you to differentiate based on student needs, while providing boundaries for what is considered reasonable. The feedback channels you provide to caregivers about what is working and what could be improved are invaluable to everyone.

Provide Timely and Meaningful Feedback

Some of the most immediate feedback we provide to students is nonverbal and verbal. One's facial expressions, tone of voice, and spoken words contextualize the feedback delivery. Although it is not a perfect solution, the comments section on many online documents, such as Google Docs, allows for voice comments on submitted work. If you haven't used this feature yet, now is a great time to learn how to do so. In addition to providing a personal touchpoint, it further contextualizes your feedback. An added bonus is that if the student shares your comments with a parent, it gives them a lot more insight into what you are paying attention to and what you see as strengths and opportunities for growth. Hearing praise is a real morale booster for everyone. Consider these to be "virtual stickers" that show students how proud you are of them.

Feedback gets stale quickly, even more so when students are left feeling as though they have submitted something into a void. Make sure that students know your feedback schedule so that they aren't checking for comments all the time. Our university distance learning colleagues remind us that providing expected deadlines creates a sense of order and fosters student perception that you are as organized as you ever were. For instance, let students know that feedback will always be submitted weekly by Monday at 4:00 p.m. Both you and they will benefit from the structure.

Show Them You Care

We are all terribly worried about our students, their families, and the communities we serve. Your demonstration of caring can happen in small ways. A silly joke you send out every day to your students, a phone call you place to a family, and personal notes sent through the mail convey that you are there, even if you are at a distance.

Article reprinted with permission from ASCD, http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol15/num17/a-positive-classroom-climate-even-from-a-distance.aspx

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Positive Student Relationships and Effective Teaching

By Gabrielle Bennett

The execution of effective teaching is a demanding responsibility. Teaching requires well- thought-out plans driven by valid data and the inclusion of differentiation to support all learners. In the planning process, teachers must consider how they will support students academically as well as socially and emotionally, and how they can help students develop strong character skills alongside their progress of content. Teachers must understand which classroom management techniques achieve target behavior while also helping students attain valuable skills. Learning tasks and activities should consider the cultural backgrounds of students, they should be student-centered, they should bring joy, and be relevant. To engage learners through intrinsic motivation and adequate support there are numerous elements to acknowledge. The fundamental component of effective teaching and learning are positive relationships with students. To adequately participate in such thorough management, planning, and teaching, educators must consider the needs of each student and it is only through knowing each student and developing relationships built on trust that this can take place with efficacy.

As educators, one aspect of teaching that many contend with is appropriately managing twenty or more students in a class at a single time. Classroom management and discipline are topics that have been studied, researched, and published for years. There is a myriad of methods and strategies claimed to be the most effective. Regardless of the intricacies, one element that is included in most methods is the importance of positive teacher-student relationships. Gregory, et, al. (2016) advocates for the use of restorative practices within schools to reverse the disproportionate overrepresentation of African Americans, Latino, and American Indians in school discipline and states that positive teacher-student relationships among all racial groups are key to creating a supportive and equitable school climate that does not rely on punitive approaches to behavior. By building relationships with all students, we develop trust and respect for one another. Kohn (2006) explains that it's important for students to trust their teacher, to know she respects them, and to feel safe in speaking their minds with her and this relationship is vital in the case of a student who has done something wrong and feels angry or defensive. If you have a relationship with students built on trust and respect it is much easier to discuss misbehavior with them and to figure out what is going on. Smith, et, al. (2015)

believe that it's harder for students to act defiantly or disrespectfully toward adults who unquestionably care about them and their future. Healthy and productive relationships between and among students and staff facilitate a positive school climate and learning environment. Shafer (2017) states that adolescents who act out are almost always expressing an emotion or a problem that's just beneath the surface. The key to improving their behavior is to figure out what function that action serves and then address the root of the problem. Curwin (2015) suggests that with chronically misbehaving students, pay close attention to their home situations, the type of misbehavior and when it occurs, and whether they behave differently with other adults but no matter what they do, believe in them, even if their behavior is serious or severe. Our students will inevitably misbehave, but when we develop positive relationships with them we are more equipped to understand that behavior and how to appropriately handle it in ways that support students and help them develop and learn from their actions.

Planning is an essential feature of teaching that encompasses goal setting, class systems, curriculum decisions, teaching and learning materials, lesson planning, grouping, learning activities, transitions, and the list goes on. Planning is paramount because it lays the foundation that we will build upon throughout the year or it could be compared to a road map showing us how to get from point A to point B. Whichever metaphor we choose, planning starts before we meet our students and continues until the end.

Our planning and implementation should be driven by data and it should consider all learners which can feel like a daunting task, especially if you do not know your students, their families, cultural background, and experiences. Caballero (2010) explains that students arrive at the schooling environment with a diverse set of background experiences, interests, and learning styles. What teachers need most to know about students is hidden and unless they develop a trusting relationship with their students, teachers will not have access to the knowledge they need either to solve classroom problems or to motivate students. As teachers learn more about how students think and feel, they will be able to create classes and plan lessons where students have fun because they are engaged in learning in diverse, purposeful, and meaningful ways. Teachers must establish a positive interpersonal relationship with students to effectively deliver the curriculum to students with intentions

of improving student academic achievement. The interaction and connection between the teacher and student must be steeped in trust, respect, and admiration, which will open up pathways of learning and eventually increase student achievement (Caballero, 2010). Through the development of positive relationships with students, teachers are better equipped to plan relevant lessons that students can connect to culturally and that suits their learning style, establish groups based on personality traits or common interests, and cultivate personalized educational environments which García-Moya, et, al. (2020) and Caballero (2010) agrees will promote higher levels of student engagement and achievement.

To effectively teach students, you cannot focus solely on academic content and expect achievement. Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam (2013) explain that a student body at any American middle or high school might conceivably comprise large numbers of adolescents experiencing living in foster homes; parental divorce or remarriage; substance abuse; material or emotional neglect; physical, mental, or sexual abuse; other dysfunctional family dynamics; or the psychological effects of transiency, homelessness, citizenship status, and racism. Students experiencing daily emotional stressors such as these may have difficulty engaging in lessons, recognizing and managing emotions, developing care and concern for others, making responsible decisions, establishing positive relationships, and coping effectively with confrontations. Poulou, (2018) supports the application of social and emotional learning within schools and believes thatteachers' emotional support acts as a protective factor to students with emotional difficulties, and at the same time buffer students' difficulties. Poulou, (2018) goes on to say that the findings further suggest that the emotional components of teacher-student relationships, in conjunction with teachers' professional skills, account to some extent for the minimization of students' emotional and behavioral difficulties. Caballero (2010) emphasized that teacher-child relationships are important for social-emotional and cognitive development as well as later academic learning and Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam (2013) state that positive teacher-student relationships have been shown to support students' adjustment to school, contribute to their social skills, and promote their academic performance. Positive relationships between teachers and students, constructed in a context of warm, respectful interaction, are central to developmentally appropriate practice and have the potential to help students manage emotional difficulties to mobilize their academic engagement.

In the pursuit to continually increase effectiveness as an educator, I believe the first step is to know my students. It is through positive relationships with students that we can more successfully maintain a safe classroom environment, promote higher levels of student engagement and achievement, and implement developmentally appropriate practices. With this in mind, I plan to devote more time throughout the year getting to know my students, their interests,

their cultural backgrounds, and experiences. This process will take the form of home visits, projects, journal entries, one-on-one interviews, and spending time with students outside of class during field trips and extracurricular activities. As I prepare for the upcoming school year I will be intentional about putting systems in place that cultivates a learning environment around trust and respect for one another, a place where students feel safe and valued. I want students will recognize that they play a fundamental role in our class culture by helping to create our class rules, participating in class jobs, engaging in surveys, and sharing in proactive and restorative circles to ensure that their voices are heard. The knowledge I gain through my relationships with students will inform my choices as an educator.

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About the Author

In 2012, Gabrielle Bennett graduated with her bachelor's degree from Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN. In 2013 she was accepted into the U.S. Peace Corps as a Rural Education Development volunteer in Zambia. For 27 months she taught English and Math in a rural Zambian public school and collaborated with local health workers to implement HIV/AIDS training to youth. After concluding her commitment of service she was selected to join the national teacher corps, Teach for America in 2016 where she taught ESL at a public elementary school in Memphis, Tennessee until 2018. She is currently working as a middle school EL teacher at a charter school in Washington, DC. She will graduate with her masters of science in education from Johns Hopkins School of Education in the fall of 2020.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CALENDAR

All September Events are Virtual

NOVEMBER

Curriculum Leadership Academy 32

Sept. 14-15 (1 of 3)

Virtual

https://cvent.me/wzYDyE

Curriculum Leadership Academy 30

Sept. 17-18 (2 of 3)

Virtual

http://www.cvent.com/d/3h-q3kr

Transformative Principal Leadership Academy

Sept. 24-25 (1 of 3)

Virtual

https://cvent.me/ZQKzGE

Curriculum Leadership Academy 32

Nov. 16-17 (2 of 3)

LOCATION:
Katy, Texas

https://cvent.me/wzYDyE

Transformative Principal Leadership Academy

Sept. 15-16 (1 of 3)

Virtual

https://cvent.me/QRx3Zv

Texas Whole Child Academy

Sept. 17-18

Virtual

https://cvent.me/yR3oQN

Beyond HB 3: Developing a School-wide Literacy Plan
Sept. 29-30
Virtual

https://cvent.me/mqLbD9

Transformative Principal Leadership Academy

Nov. 18-19 (3 of 3)

LOCATION:
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD

https://cvent.me/QRx3Zv

Instructional Rounds 2 Locations

Virtual
Sept. 15-17
http://www.cvent.com/d/vnqzgl
OR
Sept. 22-24
http://www.cvent.com/d/cnqqh9

Academy Jumpstart 2020

Sept. 22-23

Virtual

Multiple events:
https://cvent.me/DlW2n2

DECEMBER

Jay McTighe: Creating an Understanding-Based Curriculum and Assessment System

Dec. 2-3

LOCATION:
Rockwall ISD

http://www.cvent.com/d/1nq997

Events as of June 25, 2020. Dates are subject to change without notice.

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