

School Leaders: Five Steps to Increasing Student Engagement

Are students drifting off?

A new school year has begun. Students have entered their classrooms bright-eyed and eager to learn, but as the newness begins to wear off, teachers often have a difficult time keeping students' attention. As a school leader, you may often feel like it's out of your hands, but you can coach teachers to take steps to increase student engagement throughout the year. Keeping in mind that the number one way to increase engagement is to have an appropriately high level of cognitive complexity in a well-planned lesson, there are also simple steps a teacher can take within the lesson to "pull kids back in".



STEP 1: Be Proactive

Sometimes, there actually is a quick fix. Tell teachers to start off by asking the student(s), "What's getting in the way of your attention?" Perhaps a sound is distracting them or a glare from the window is preventing them from seeing the whiteboard. Maybe they're confused about something the teacher just covered and need to go over it again.

STEP 2: Use Strategic Positioning

Where a teacher stands can impact student engagement. For example, a daydreaming student will often become more alert if the teacher stands next to him—or if he sits in the front row or in a desk closer to the teacher. Other students are intimidated by a close proximity and may be distracted by the close presence. Have teachers consider the positioning of each student and arrange the class in a manner that will keep everyone engaged.

STEP 3: Be More Engaging

When a teacher falls into "lecture mode" for too long, students begin to drift off. To prevent this, suggest ways teachers can involve students in every part of every lesson. This may include: Using analogies to connect content to students' lives, letting them share stories and prior knowledge. Playing games that reinforce the learning. Playing background music to maintain a lively atmosphere. Showing videos about the content.

STEP 4: Challenge Students

Nothing wakes up a class better than a sudden challenge. Have teachers think about ways they can deepen students' understanding through inventions, puzzles, riddles, or competitions. They can send students on scavenger hunts or have them solve mysteries, either as individuals or in small groups. If there's an incentive attached, they'll all quickly become engaged.

STEP 5: Organize Students

Organization is critical, and part of organization is making sure everyone knows what to expect. Remind teachers to post learning goals at the beginning of each lesson and to tell students what they're going to learn and what they're going to do so they can see the progress throughout the lesson. You can also organize the class in a way that improves the learning environment. Depending on the topic and activity, you might: Put students into small groups so they can interact; Have a student assist you by taking notes on the board while you speak; Tell students to stand up and move around to increase alertness; Choose a student to do the teaching for you for a while .

As the school leader, your role is to provide resources and ideas to teachers, to give them feedback to assist them to notice when students are "checking out" and to have a number of tools in their toolbox to pull out "on the spot" to address those needs. Always reinforce to your teachers, though, that the well-planned cognitively complex lesson, with pre-planned tasks that incorporate student interests and challenge them to work together to solve problems, make decisions, etc., is the proactive approach that will mean having to use fewer of those interventions during a lesson.