

Intentional Instructional Moves

Strategic Steps to
Accelerate Student
Learning

Companion Guide

Chapter 4: Emotional Engagement
Intentional Step Two



Chapter 4

Intentional Step Two: Build Connections with Students to Promote a Safe Learning Environment

Schools must be safe spaces, physically and psychologically, if we want our students to be emotionally engaged. To ensure students feel safe in the classroom and their individual needs are addressed, teachers should get to know their students on a more personal level. Building connections between the teacher and their students, and among students themselves, helps customize the learning experience and increases student achievement. As the facilitator of a learning community, the teacher helps regulate student behaviors and reinforces social and emotional skills such as taking turns, voicing thoughts appropriately, and resolving conflicts that arise. Moreover, building these deep connections with students helps them feel like they belong (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). For more tips on building a healthy classroom community, see Chapter 18.

Strategy 1: Warm-Up Reflection

The teacher begins class by asking questions that help them evaluate what the students know and/or whether they have a connection to the content they will cover that day. These questions can be written on the board ahead of time, and might include:

- Do you have any experiences that help you connect to today's content?
- On a scale of 1-5, how interested are you in today's topic? Please explain.
- How do you think you might use the information we are going to discuss today in your life outside of school?

Based on students' responses, the teacher can then facilitate a brief discussion and gauge the level of interest.

Asking these warm-up questions helps teachers ascertain students' knowledge of and connection to the content, and if they can see the relevance of what they're learning. Previewing whether students will be emotionally engaged during the lesson and/or if they can see the value of the content also helps teachers get to know their students better and manage the classroom more effectively. Students will practice planning and prediction strategies (.76) as they think about what they are going to learn and how they can succeed, as well as analysis, self-awareness, and self-reflection.

Strategy 2: Best of Ideas

First, students think of their own idea silently and then share it with three to four other students. The group then decides whose answer is the best one to share out loud and why. All of the group members must agree on the strongest idea and be able to justify it. Then, they will share that idea with the whole class. If the teacher notices that the group of three or four is still too big, this activity can also be done as a Think-Pair-Share. In the Think-Pair-Share, students will pair up one-to-one, discuss which idea is best and why, and then decide which answer to share.

This activity is beneficial when students are reluctant to share their ideas in a group setting. It promotes an extra layer of comfort and safety because students start by sharing their ideas with a small group rather than the entire class, where they might be concerned about their idea getting shut down. The best answer is shared as that group's idea versus an individual's. This exercise also ensures that the students whose ideas aren't getting heard, for whatever reason, can

voice their thinking and receive feedback from other students. If they're not confident sharing with the whole class, they might be more likely to share their thoughts in a small group setting. For additional ideas on facilitating group work, see Chapter 15.

Small group work is well studied in the field of education, with an overwhelming majority of the research agreeing that it has a significant impact on student achievement. When implemented successfully, the effect size can be as high as 1.03 (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Best of strategies also encourage students to practice critical thinking, reasoning, active learning, and cooperation and recognize the strengths of others.