

Intentional Instructional Moves

Strategic Steps to
Accelerate Student
Learning

Companion Guide

Chapter 4: Emotional Engagement
Intentional Step One



Chapter 4

Intentional Step One: Encourage Students to Take Ownership of Their Learning

To help students gain more agency in the learning process, we can begin by looking at what might be holding them back. For example, students could be more accustomed to looking to the teacher first for guidance and answers rather than trusting their own knowledge and skills—or those of their peers; or they might lack the confidence or self-esteem to take on a particular learning task. Alternatively, they might not understand how the task relates to their goals and interests. To help develop the skills of independent learning, teachers can create opportunities for self-discovery in the classroom. As students set goals and achieve them, they'll build confidence and be more willing to try again, which helps establish a culture of growth and self-reflection.

Strategy 1: Goal-Setting

Students use a goal-setting worksheet to record their content and/or behavior goals. They then reflect on the steps needed to reach those goals and set a reasonable timeframe for completing them. As they work toward achieving their aims, they track their progress and make adjustments as needed. See the “My Goals” handout for a sample goal-setting graphic organizer.

Teachers should remember that student goals need to be specific, attainable, and achievable within a realistic timeframe (SMART). If the goal is too large, students might not see a path forward and get discouraged. Moreover, students will only experience real growth if the goal is meaningful to them. For example, instead of writing, "I'm going to improve my reading," students could set a more specific target to "read three non-fiction books in two weeks to help improve my reading." With a more focused and concrete goal, students can see a clearer path forward and the value of pursuing it.

Throughout this book, we will emphasize the importance of taking small steps toward improvement. Just as teachers should take incremental steps toward growth, our students should also be encouraged to do the same. Students will be more motivated if they know the steps to reach their goals. As they achieve success, they will be inspired to set further goals. For additional goal setting strategies, see Chapter 13.

Goal setting is a high-impact strategy for both Marzano (2003) and Hattie (2017), with a .56 effect size. It allows students to self-reflect on how well they're doing and then set goals for improvement. This promotes critical thinking, initiative, resilience, self-management, and self-efficacy.

Strategy 2: Utilize Growth Mindset

Growth mindset is deeply connected to emotional engagement. However, in schools, we often begin in a deficit mode because students come to us having heard more negative comments than positive ones. In his book *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind*, Eric Jensen writes that "In poor homes, the ratio of positives (affirmations) to negatives (reprimands) is typically a 1-to-2 ratio. Contrast this with the 6-to-1 positives-to-negatives ratio in the homes of higher income families" (p. 15, 2018). In this context, teachers need to offset some of the negative language students have heard in their daily lives with positive language that helps them recognize that they can grow and achieve their goals and have the skills to do so.

Use growth mindset language and affirmations to encourage and reinforce students' strengths, skills, and behaviors. When a student says, "I can't do this," reframe the statement back to them: "You can't do this *yet*." Similarly, if a student is discouraged because their peers have already completed a task, take the time to explain how growth is a journey. Not all students will

be at the same level or reach understanding within the same timeframe. Model patience and allow students the time and space to productively struggle with a task or question. Timing is less important than persistent effort. Here are a few examples of grow mindset phrases teachers can model for students:

- *Failure is an opportunity to learn and grow.*
- *I like to take risks and try new things.*
- *Challenges help me improve.*
- *I believe I can reach my goals.*

For additional strategies to help foster a growth mindset, see Chapter 14.

Establishing a culture of growth and positive affirmations helps reassure students that they are safe making mistakes and taking risks. All students need this type of encouragement. When students feel confident and supported, they will make more of an effort and engage more deeply with the material. Growth mindset language also promotes self-questioning (.55), self-efficacy (.92), flexibility, and responsible decision making.

Strategy 3: End Class with Reflection

At the end of the class, the teacher facilitates a short check-in with the whole class. For instance, the teacher might say, "How did we do with our goals today?" The goal could be that everyone stayed on task, or it might be individualized to each student. *Did you accomplish what you set out to do today? Were you able to find answers to your questions?* The goals don't necessarily have to be related to content; they might also include behaviors the teacher is trying to promote. After checking in about the goals for that day, the teacher asks students to rate themselves. They can do this as a group or individually. Then, the teacher gives students

feedback on their ratings. This reflection period can be conducted as a class meeting with a discussion, or teachers might ask students to write a brief summary on a note card about how well they think they performed that day. To clarify, students aren't singled out for their behavior; instead, the goal is to provide feedback for the whole group.

I watched a teacher conduct an end of class reflection in one of the schools I coached in Hawaii. It was amazing to observe how students' behavior shifted following the exercise because they knew what the teacher expected. It also led to a productive class discussion. Instead of only reviewing content at the end of class, teachers can include a discussion of the SEL skills they're trying to promote. For example, they can ask students: *How well did we respect our peers? How well did we listen to each other?* Be mindful of encouraging total student engagement so all students are able to participate.

This strategy sets expectations for certain behaviors in the classroom. It helps students see themselves as part of the community and consider how they can contribute to classroom cohesion (.44), which develops collaboration and teamwork skills. The reflection also helps teachers and students set goals for improving the next day.

Teaching Tip: As teachers incorporate these strategies, it's helpful to circulate the room and give feedback while students complete the activities. This allows teachers to hear students' thinking, observe what they write down, answer questions, and check if students are progressing. Performing these kinds of assessments can inform teachers about where students are experiencing learning gaps and where they need to go next.