

Intentional Instructional Moves

Strategic Steps to
Accelerate Student
Learning

Companion Guide

Chapter 18: Intentional Step Two



Chapter 18

Intentional Step Two: Create a Welcoming Environment

The classroom environment can significantly influence how students interact with the teacher and each other. According to the Quaglia Institute, only 45% of elementary students and 38% of middle and high schoolers believe they are a valued member of their school community (2024a; 2024b). But teachers can absolutely shift these numbers in a positive direction.

To create a productive community of learners, we want to ensure the classroom is calm and inviting, positive and encouraging, and reinforces student ownership of learning. Creating a sanctuary in the classroom reduces anxiety and helps students feel more at ease and connected to the space. To make the classroom cozier and inviting, teachers can decorate the classroom walls with warm, calming colors and add comfortable seating like bean bag chairs and floor pillows. Teachers can also bring in plants and hang posters with positive affirmations. They can create communal spaces in the classroom where students can gather during transitions and on breaks (Stanfield, n.d.). I've seen several classrooms where teachers built a Reading Corner, set in a quiet part of the classroom with a bookshelf and comfortable places to sit and read.

A positive learning environment inspires students to care about one another and reinforces desirable behaviors (Ivory, 2021). The teacher can model and promote positivity in the classroom by greeting students every day, offering genuine praise, having lunch with students, and rewarding them when they make progress toward their goals. When teachers demonstrate that they care about their students, it builds trust and a sense of belonging. And students will often pick up on these behaviors and follow them. Teachers can also model positive social and emotional skills, like appearing calm and pleasant in class and practicing mindfulness and self-care.

The classroom environment can be used to foster student agency and student-led interactions. Teachers can design areas where students meet and mingle on their own, or designate a whole-group meeting spot, away from desks or tables. They might set up a library or storage area in the classroom that students are responsible for maintaining. Or they can build a Quiet Space where students can go to calm down or talk through challenges. Giving students agency in how they use the space and interact with one another helps encourage them to become more independent and take ownership of their classroom and community (CASEL, n.d.a). For more ideas on adapting the classroom environment, see Chapter 12.

Strategy 1: Student Photo Gallery

The teacher creates a bulletin board or digital display that features each student's photograph and some personal details, such as their name, age, and interests. The teacher and students can get to know one another through this gallery and use what students have shared as conversation starters. For example, the teacher can ask students to find classmates who have similar interests, or put them in small groups and have them ask questions about what students have shared (Stanfield, n.d.).

This strategy helps personalize the classroom and creates a designated space where students can share details about themselves and learn about their classmates. The Photo Gallery gives teachers insight into students' backgrounds and interests and promotes strong classroom cohesion (.44). Students can also practice empathy and self and social-awareness.

Strategy 2: Classroom Norms

Collaborate with students on a set of classroom norms. Students can describe themselves as a community of learners and what they want that community to look like. This list should include classroom policies and procedures as well as expectations for behavior. Provide direct instruction on these norms, such as how students should work with a partner, where they can find certain materials, what they should do when they need help, and how they can agree or disagree with a peer respectfully.

To ensure students grow in their understanding and application of classroom norms, these policies should be modeled and referred to regularly. For example, when students work in small groups, they can begin by reviewing the guidelines for how to have a respectful discussion. The group leader (or other designated group member) can assume the role of ensuring the group adheres to the guidelines. If someone deviates from the norms, the group leader can redirect them: “Hey, let's keep the conversation focused on ideas,” or “Jenny, do you have anything to add to that?” In this way, they can model the behavior and remind their peers of how to have a productive conversation.

By generating a list of norms collaboratively, students can identify desirable and challenging behaviors and discuss which ones will create a more productive and inclusive community. Students can also take ownership of how they speak and act in the classroom and hold themselves and their peers accountable. This encourages positive peer influence (.53) and classroom cohesion (.44). Students will also develop greater resilience, flexibility, self-awareness, and social influence as they learn and apply the norms.

Strategy 3: Warm & Fuzzies

Building on Classroom Norms, teachers can brainstorm with students a list of desirable behaviors. Then teachers and students can model how to demonstrate these behaviors, like kindness, cooperation, and acceptance. Whenever students exhibit these behaviors, the teacher gives them a fuzzy colored ball. These balls are collected in a classroom jar and when the jar is full, the whole class gets a reward. As the year progresses, the teacher can invite students to recognize these behaviors and hand out fuzzies to each other. For instance, the teacher might end class by asking: “Who deserves a Warm and Fuzzy?” Students then nominate their peers and give them the fuzzies.

This strategy reinforces classroom norms and positive behaviors. Students will learn to recognize qualities like kindness, gratitude, and respect in themselves and others, and practice these behaviors more regularly (Crowe, 2022). These self-regulation strategies (.52) can help students practice resilience, empathy, and social influence.

Strategy 4: Suggestion Box

The teacher creates a classroom Suggestion Box and invites students to share their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions anonymously. Students can write down their comments and place them in a physical box, or the teacher can use digital tools to create a similar version of this. After students submit their suggestions, the teacher shares the feedback with the class anonymously. The class can then discuss the feedback and come up with solutions together.

Alternatively, teachers can use Comment Cards to gather similar feedback. Students write weekly notes to the teacher, or use classroom forums to submit comments. The teacher can pass out cards with prompts like: “One thing I wish my teacher knew...” Students will fill in the blanks and pass the cards back to the teacher. Or, students might write fun facts about themselves

and then pass them to another student. That student then has to guess who the card is about.

The Suggestion Box and Comment Cards help teachers and students get to know each other. These strategies give students opportunities to share their ideas and reinforce the belief that their voices matter. The teacher also gains valuable insight into how to improve the classroom environment so they can create and maintain a supportive community (Whalen, 2023). With this form of classroom cohesion (.44), students can practice active listening and leadership skills, and increase their motivation.