

# When Students Don't Learn

The ideas below represent the thinking of teacher groups who shared their ideas in response to the question: **What do I do when students don't learn?** The ideas are grouped in three categories: **Before Assessment, After Assessment, and At Any Time.**

Read through a section and discuss the suggestions listed there. After discussion, decide which ones you want to add to your practice. Place a check in front of the ideas that you want to add to your repertoire. Repeat the process with each of the three sections.

## Before Assessment

The best intervention is prevention! When we take a proactive approach to set students up for success, little or minimal follow-up is necessary since students successfully demonstrate their learning the first time they are assessed.

- Provide extra help to selected students during available times such as before school, during lunch, or after school.
- Be proactive by providing a peer helper during in-class learning activities in order to support new learning.
- End instruction 10-15 minutes early. Allow students who understand the lesson to begin individual practice or group work; work individually or in small groups with students who may be struggling.
- Present new content in a variety of ways to meet different learning styles. For example, provide manipulatives, include lots of visuals, and allow for students to talk in pairs or small groups to process their learning.
- Offer materials at lower skill levels to match a student's beginning point. As the student makes progress, increase the level of the instructional materials.
- Employ cooperative learning strategies during instruction since some students can learn easier through peer-to-peer interactions.
- Have students establish specific learning/improvement goals prior to the next unit of study.
- Give students the opportunity to choose a different way to show what they have learned.
- Use formative assessment data to make instructional decisions so that you are able to clarify content and correct misunderstandings prior to administering the assessment.
- Encourage students to self-assess their comprehension of the content as new learning is presented.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ Tell students with specificity how to use their time to study for or prepare for the upcoming assessment.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Vary the types of assessments that are administered to students (e.g., short answer, essay, performance tasks, etc.) in order to give students a variety of ways to show what they have learned.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Provide specific and detailed feedback about what each student is doing right rather than what they are doing wrong.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Establish peer tutoring sessions prior to testing to help students prepare for the upcoming test.

## After Assessment

When students have been unsuccessful in demonstrating their mastery of content, it is vital that we take the time to analyze the assessment results and to determine the next steps. We should routinely make data-driven decisions by asking themselves:

- Which students may need additional support?
- Which students may require some tutoring, re-teaching, or one-on-one assistance?
- Which students may need an additional opportunity to reach mastery on the current content?

It is important to remember that the emphasis should be on learning and not just grading.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Allow students to re-take assessments to correct errors or mistakes. Students often miss questions because they read them too quickly or make careless errors.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make it a regular practice to give students multiple opportunities on assessments to reach mastery level learning (e.g., 80% or above).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Break down the skills or content on the assessment to determine where misunderstanding occurred after an assessment and use the data to provide follow-up support.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Change roles. Ask the student to teach the content to you (in his or her own words) to determine where the breakdown in comprehension occurred.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make a copy of the students' test. Have the student make corrections in different color (for emphasis). Review the student's work and give the student credit for the corrected work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Return the assessment to the student. Have the student re-write missed questions in his or her own words, then answer the questions, and resubmit the test for credit.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ Complete an error analysis after the students finish an assessment to ensure that questions were clearly stated.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Re-teach the incorrect or misunderstood content to students in one-on-one sessions and allow re-testing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Reflect on the unit just completed in order to determine what worked well and what may need revision in instructional delivery in upcoming unit(s).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Have students write out their improvement plans in preparation for future units for both in-class behaviors as well as ways to improve study habits. (Written plans are more likely to be followed than simply “thinking” about how to improve).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Build on mistakes or answers that are partially correct instead of emphasizing what the student(s) did wrong.

## At Any Time

With careful planning, we can set our students up for success through day-to-day instructional practices, thus avoiding remediation or intervention. Many teachers never have to re-teach or re-test their students since the students are successful the first time when their learning is assessed. These practices are instructional, personal or motivational in nature.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Build personal relationships with students so that they know and believe that you are invested in helping them achieve success.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Enlist support from parents by letting them know with specificity how they can work with their child at home.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Demonstrate through examples that it is the student's personal day-to-day work habits that will pay off when they are tested.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Include opportunities for practice and repetition during instructional delivery to reinforce new learning and/or review prior learning.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Check for student understanding on a regular basis during instruction using a variety of approaches (e.g., direct questions, white boards, summarizing techniques, etc.). Use the data from these checks to determine which students can work on enrichment while the teacher provides more direct instruction for students who may need additional time to learn.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Provide students with specific and detailed feedback on their work so they know how to build on what they have already learned.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Add to student confidence by pointing out where they have shown growth in specific skills and knowledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Follow the three R's (Redo, Retake, and Revise) on a regular basis.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ Pre-assess student knowledge and skills prior to teaching a unit to determine which students may be lacking in basic skills or have gaps in their prior knowledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Show your human side by acknowledging mistakes you have made or how you may have struggled with learning when you were a student.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Develop examples to use during instruction that link the content to the lives of your students.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Dispel the belief on the parts of some students that they are “stupid.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ Show your students that you are a life-long learner and that there is much that you can learn from them.