

Top 10 Ways to Improve Student Achievement and Create Learners

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MET... MMMMetttttttttt... Never has the word, met, sounded so beautiful. This past week our elementary school received information that we have met our goal of getting out of School Improvement within two years. It has been an insightful journey. Contrary to popular belief, there is one positive aspect to a school being placed in School Improvement: It opens eyes that growth has an opportunity to happen.

One of the major negatives is that change is rarely welcome. People tend to like the status quo and do not want the apple cart overturned. Our first year was fraught with change; change in vision, strategies, instructional methods and materials. Through it all, our staff preserved as we worked on our improvement.

Over the course of my educational experience I've collected a list of criteria that I believe create an atmosphere ripe for improving student achievement. Here I will call it:

Top 10 Ways to Improve Student Achievement and Create Learners

Disclaimer: This is by no means all that schools should be doing. Note that these are broad actions; there are many more detailed actions that need to be taken.

1. Share a Vision -- Review your school's Mission Statement. Your new vision should be tied to your district's Mission Statement, but build up on it. The vision should describe why it is important to achieve your mission statement while looking to the future. It should portray what will be achieved if the school is successful in achieving its goals. Everyone should be invested in the vision with a total buy-in from the entire school. You have to keep your eye on the prize and never veer from your vision.

2. Your School Should Be a Change Agent -- Change agents are passionate and driven about their vision. They make the tough decisions keeping what's best for the students in focus. When complaints about change and improvement come rolling in, and they will, pay close attention to your leadership and their decisions. If the leaders of a district do not want to upset the teachers or parents by moving forward, then your district's chances of improving are minimal at best. It's then that you find out what your leadership is made of in your school; from your school board on down to the principals.

3. Analyze Data -- Everyone involved must be data analysis; from the administration to the teachers. The secret to data analysis is to do something with the data. Many schools analyze the data and do not do anything with it. Celebrate your strengths, keep the focus on improvement and draw up plans on how you're going to improve on your weaknesses and implement it.

4. Introduce Students to Their Data -- As obvious as this may sound, many times teachers take on the burden of the responsibility and do not allow students to take ownership of their education. Involve students by sharing their data with them from standardized test data to classroom data.

5. Increase Rigor -- Schools are looking for miracles and the cure is right under their noses. Schools can do everything else in this list, including reducing class size, but if a school does not increase the rigor in instruction and learning, they are spitting in the wind. The key is recognizing the difference between hard questions and complex questions. Many teachers will tell you that they have rigorous assignments, when in reality, they do not. This one thing will make the biggest impact in not only learning, but in scores. If schools were to increase the rigor and complexity, the scores would take care of themselves.

6. Teach Students the Levels of Rigor^[1] -- Teach students the difference between recall, application, and strategic reasoning. When students learn the difference between how much thinking is required to answer questions at each level, it assists them in not only answering questions, but also in their learning. I've taught the levels to my former students and it was a defining moment in their careers as learners. This strategy paired with the above mentioned increasing rigor in instruction and assignments is a powerful combination.

7. Expectations -- Expectations go hand-in-hand with increasing rigor. Students will

rise to expectations. Make sure the expectations are not set too low and demonstrate an expectation that all students can achieve the objectives of courses.

8. Teach Students How to Learn -- Students are taught what to learn. In order for them to be successful as learners, they also have to discover how to learn and to develop an appetite for learning^[2]. I'm convinced that one of the reasons some students do not succeed in college is that they sail through high school learning the prescribed curriculum, but never learn how to learn.

Students, at an early age have to be taught how to:

- self-regulate their learning
- set their own academic goals
- develop strategies to meet their goals
- reflect on their academic performance

9. Teachers as Learners Environment -- Teachers are all about instructing their students. Teachers should also invest in themselves. I'm referring to teachers actively pursuing knowledge because they want to know more. The best teachers continue to grow and don't rely solely on school designated professional development hours as their outlet to learn new concepts and ideas about education. This could include reading professional development books, blogs, or articles online. One powerful way to continue to grow as an educator is to join an online personal learning network^[3]and/or develop one on Twitter^[4].

10. Teach Smarter and Not Harder -- Incorporate research-based teaching and learning strategies. In order to grow the district and its teachers need to be on top of the latest developments in research-based strategies. ^[5]

These are the highlights of what I deem as important to creating an atmosphere that encourages student achievement. Our school still has changes that need to be made. Hopefully, we will strive to continue the good work we have begun and combine that with goals toward the future. Last year the number of schools in School Improvement^[6] across the United States was 12,599. That number is staggering, but if there's one thing I know about educators, it's that we are dedicated and we never give up. To quote the latest Robin Hood movie, we shall "Rise and rise again until lambs become lions^[7]."

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1. <http://schoolweb.missouri.edu/poplarbluff.k12.mo.us/lowe/DOK1a.pdf>
2. <http://quietube.com/v.php/http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpJQqzJj534>
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