

MASTERING

THE PRINCIPLES OF GREAT

TEACHING

How to Support Struggling Students

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<i>You have prepared your students for learning and set them up to be successful, but what happens if they still struggle? How will you help those students who falter during instruction?</i>	

Supporting Students Before Instruction



In this chapter you will . . .

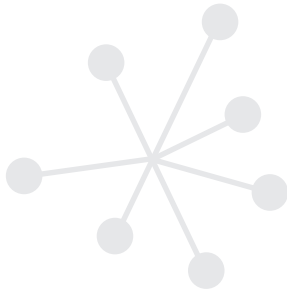
- Learn the two biggest reasons students struggle.
- Look at the “three C’s” of an upcoming unit to anticipate where students might be confused.
- Look at other factors that could contribute to students’ confusion.
- Learn how to activate or create background knowledge.
- Create an advance organizer for an upcoming unit.
- Learn how to select appropriate organizing strategies and how to preview them for students.
- Decide which organizing strategies will work best for your students in an upcoming unit.
- Learn how to accelerate students’ vocabulary so that they can access unit content.
- Develop a vocabulary plan to use in an upcoming unit.
- Create an overall acceleration plan.



Time-Saving Tools

You will complete the work in this chapter more quickly if you have the following handy:

- Your plans for an upcoming unit, including the objectives, the day-to-day plans, and the essential understanding or “big ideas.”
- All assignments you will give for an upcoming unit.
- The summative assessment for an upcoming unit.
- Any curriculum guides for the unit provided by your school or district.



Now that you understand the principle, how will you help students reach mastery? The first step is to figure out how you will support students before the lesson or unit even begins.

Why do students struggle in school? Generally, it is because they lack either the background knowledge or the “soft skills” they need to acquire and retain new information.

Students who struggle because of a lack of background knowledge don’t have the vocabulary or the experiences they need to make sense of new information. Without an understanding of the vocabulary and without the experiences that provide context, they have nothing on which to “hook” the new knowledge. This kind of prior knowledge is vital for reading comprehension and critical thinking, and without it, students are at a serious disadvantage.

“Soft skills” are the skills that support learning, such as note taking, study skills, and organization. Students who lack these tools are able to learn, but the process of learning required by many classrooms mystifies them. They do not know how to take notes in a way that facilitates review, they do not know how to study from their notes, they don’t know how to ask for help when they struggle, and they may not even know how to monitor themselves in order to recognize that they are not making progress.

Many students would struggle much less in school if, before we presented new material for them to learn, we took the time to help them acquire background

knowledge and skills that will help them learn. Acceleration strategies that preview content and the skills ensure a proper foundation for new learning. Investing time in teaching students *how* to learn is never wasted; in doing so, you deepen their understanding of the upcoming content and better equip them for future success.

Why We Shouldn't Wait to Intervene

Instead of addressing the root causes of student failure—lack of prior knowledge and lack of soft skills—most supports we provide for students attempt to address specific, identified deficits. We work to help students complete particular assignments, for example, or try to reteach everything the student did not get the first time. But if we wait for kids to fail before we intervene, we are setting them up for even more failure. The research shows that the longer students stay in traditional remedial programs, the further they fall below grade level (Thompson, Thompson, & Thompson, 2005). When you think about it, remediation is really taking students backward rather than forward. And the more that they are backward-focused, trying to catch up and keep up at the same time, the more frustrated they become and the more hopeless they feel.

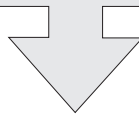
Waiting for students to fail before providing them with the support they need also creates another problem. If students are having difficulty understanding a concept and we wait until the unit is over to go over that concept again and provide them with support, they have to restart their study of that concept at the same time we are asking them to master the concepts in a new unit. With instruction that is so disjointed, they are likely to have an even harder time learning.

One of the biggest problems associated with not intervening until after students have failed is that the experience of academic failure significantly lowers students' self-esteem and sense of efficacy. They lose confidence in their ability to learn. They begin to believe that they can't do any better and that they will always be behind. They often just give up. The research tells us that self-esteem and self-efficacy account for about 50 percent of students' achievement (Thompson et al., 2005). By allowing students to fail before we begin to intervene, we are actually limiting their chances of success. Instead of asking how we can help our students catch up, we should be asking how we can make learning more likely the first time around.

Sample Activation Plan

Key Concept

Geometric figures are similar when corresponding angles are congruent and when the lengths of corresponding sides are proportional.



Background Knowledge

Ratios

- Defining ratios
- Solving for x in ratios

Measurement

- Angles
- Length

Parts of a Whole

- Fractions
- Equivalent Fractions

Activating Strategy

Statement strategy on the concept of ratios with true and false statements about ratios to help uncover any misconceptions students have about ratios

Warm-up activity in which students solve for x as practice

Group activity in which students measure the different angles on a worksheet, to be followed by a class discussion of angles

Students who need more background knowledge will read *The Greedy Triangle* by Marilyn Burns to learn about key geometry concepts

Word splash showing how fractions, ratios, and measurement relate to the concept of proportions



THINK ABOUT . . .

Consider a lesson you have taught in which some students didn't have the background knowledge you assumed they would have. How did that gap affect the lesson? What "on the spot" corrections did you have to make? Now think about an upcoming lesson in which students may have insufficient background knowledge. How can you plan beforehand to address the gap?



YOUR TURN

Acquire: Consider the introductory lesson for an upcoming unit or lesson sequence. Identify the concepts, content/processes, and context that may confuse students or about which they may have limited background knowledge. Then identify one strategy you will use to help activate students' prior knowledge before the lesson. Start collecting other activating strategies you can use with students.

Apply: Look ahead to all the lessons in an upcoming mini-unit or lesson sequence. Determine what strategy you will use to activate students' background knowledge. Then, identify the content and processes about which students have limited background knowledge. Select one strategy you will use to help create background knowledge for students. Begin using additional activating strategies with students in future lessons.

Assimilate: Look ahead to all the lessons in an upcoming unit. Using formative assessment strategies and recalling your own experience with students, identify the content and processes about which students have limited background knowledge. Next, think about the strategies you typically use to activate or create background knowledge for students. Identify parts of the lessons where it would be beneficial to include more activities strategies and select one or more of the strategies on page 26 to use with students in the upcoming unit.