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What Are Your New School-Year Resolutions?

By Larry Ferlazzo

As school was ending in June, I thought that it was as good a time as any to begin thinking about what I wanted to do differently in the upcoming school year—and why.



[← Back to Story](#)

I have written in a previous article about **the importance of reflection** in the classroom. During my 20-year first career as a community organizer, we would continually emphasize the importance of this practice by saying that without it, many people were “a pile of undigested actions.” To take that metaphor a bit further, I guess you could say that reflection is like Pepto Bismol!

In fact, **one study** suggests that when we are experiencing something, we are recording what is happening in our memory, but the “actual learning” occurs afterward when we’re thinking about it. As I was applying this idea to my classroom practice a month or so ago, I invited readers of my blog to do the same. Within two weeks, 50 educators **shared what they want to do differently** in the next school year, ranging from principal Patrick Larkin deciding to put wheels on his desk and move it to a new location every week to teacher Kevin Hodgson wanting to help his students develop better online reading skills.

Here are a few of the things I am planning to do differently in the next school year:

Have more fun: Psychologist William Glasser talks about fun being one of the five basic human needs. There is no reason why I can’t include more of it in my lessons. It is easy to have review games or a two-minute contest to see who can unscramble a sentence scramble. Anytime I do these activities and see how much students learn from the experience and enjoy it, I wonder why I don’t do them more often.

Explain more of the why: Whether it is explaining to students that we are spending time putting information into categories because the brain naturally looks for patterns, or that one reason we use K-W-L charts (What I Know, What I Want To Know, What I Have Learned) is because we learn best when connecting new information to what we already know. I want to be more intentional about helping students understand the *why* behind classroom lessons. Research shows, and common sense reinforces, that we are more invested in doing something if we clearly understand how it will directly benefit us.

Connect with more athletic coaches: Some students in my inner-city high school face many challenges beyond academic ones. On occasion, an athlete is among them. Since my classes are structured in a way that if students show up each day and try their best, they will pass, I seldom use an academic grade as leverage to gain work from students who want to play on sports teams.

However, this coming year, I have made arrangements with our coaches to give weekly unofficial grades to athletes in areas that are equally important in class, life, and in athletics: teamwork, leadership, and respect. Coaches have agreed to take these grades as seriously, if not more seriously, than the academic grade athletes will receive in my class. Any teacher who has ever taught a student highly invested in an extracurricular activity knows you can't top that sort of leverage!

Frontload life-skills lessons: Last year, I began to teach lessons on self-control; on how the brain is a muscle that can grow with learning; on not blaming others; and other life-skills. (For more on these lesson plans, visit **my blog** and look for my book next spring on classroom management and instructional strategies from Eye On Education.) They had a huge effect on student motivation. However, I did them throughout the year, usually as a result of a particular classroom problem. Now I want to do most of these kinds of lessons during the first part of the school year with periodic mini-lesson reminders. Having this kind of frontloading, I think, can help short-circuit problems before they begin.

Prepare students more to handle challenges to classroom culture: My classes get many transfer students during the year, all of whom are unfamiliar with our classroom culture. Many also come from challenging situations. One of the early life-skills lessons I do is **have students decide** if they want a "community of learners" or a "classroom of students" (the common dictionary definition of a class). We review the different characteristics of both, and students almost always decide they want to be in a community of learners. However, that can be challenging for transfer students who do not have the benefit of the prior relationships and experiences that the rest of the students have shared. As part of that initial lesson, I now intend for us to discuss more about how the class can help new students quickly learn this community culture.

Observe other teachers: It is easy for teachers to be totally consumed by their own classroom. And even though our school has a strong collaborative culture, much of that collaboration time is spent developing lessons that we will each use in our classes and then discussing the outcome. It is an entirely different story to find the time to actually *observe* teachers teaching those lessons. This coming year, however, I am vowing to use one free period a month to observe, and learn from, another educator in our school.

The word "reflection" comes from the Latin *reflexionem*—a bending back. A year from now I'll be bending back and reviewing how well I did at implementing these changes.

If you dare, share your own resolutions for the new school year in the comments section of this article, and we can all hold each other accountable next August!

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