Making the Case for Flexibility and Grace: The Importance of Flexibility This Fall

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For most students and teachers, the 2020-2021 is now well underway, with families as well as educators adapting to new health guidelines and learning methods. As everyone adjusts, it's important to keep in mind the growing pains that all are facing as students sign online for classes, even if it is just part time on a hybrid basis. With endless complications like spotty Wi-Fi access and technology issues, it's easy to imagine everything that can go wrong as students start turning in their first assignments.

That's exactly why it's crucial that both parents and teachers to practice patience and offer some grace to kids who are struggling to connect or engage. In fact, the importance of flexibility in the classroom has never been more important, as children work through the curriculum during what may prove to be one of the toughest school years yet.

Let's take a closer look at what educators should keep in mind, as well as a list of do's and don'ts for when it comes to practicing flexibility in the (possibly virtual) classroom.

Focus on Relationships, First

Most teachers already understand that it's not their job to befriend their students. However, during this strange age of social distancing, connection with fellow humans is badly needed and should be prioritized. After all, students learn best from adults they know they can trust, even during the easiest of times! This means that school staff members should make it a point to make authentic connections with students in whatever way they can, whether that is online or in a socially distanced classroom environment.

Only after that social connection is established can teachers begin the tough work of growing their little learners' academic skills. Once learning is underway in earnest, consider the following do's and don'ts for teaching while remaining flexible and empathetic towards your students:

Do's

Accept and embrace the inherent awkwardness of teaching online

We get it: teaching online is strange! Where once an educator can "read the room" and respond to a child's confusion, frustration, or joy, teaching through a screen eliminates any possibility for informal observation. In some cases, a student's webcam might be off or unavailable, and in others, a student may be stressed or distracted simply because they are at home and are not in a traditional school setting.

With that in mind, it's important for teachers to accept early on that virtual teaching will not be the same as it is in the classroom. It might be awkward at first to teach to students who aren't responding to questions, or who may be turning their mics on and off with reckless abandon! Embrace the fact that it will be tough and sometimes awkward for both you and the kids as lessons proceed via the internet.

Teach new technology tools like you would any other concept: model it

For everyone involved, learning new technology and apps could prove to be quite a steep learning curve. No matter if you teach elementary or middle school, present the new tools to students as you would with any other skills: through explicit modeling!

Try sharing your screen on your videoconferencing app to show students and parents exactly how to find their work on your learning management system, or how to submit it. When planning lesson plans, assume that the children or parents don't already know how to access the tool you're using, and review how to use it before continuing your lesson.

Set deadlines, but practice empathy and understanding

Of course, teaching children to honor deadlines and due dates are important for setting them up for success in their future career and professional lives! However, the pandemic has made school infinitely more difficult with families who are struggling to get or stay connected. Even in schools that are "1 to 1", who provide kids with their own device such as an iPad or Chromebook, district software and networks aren't known to be perfect. IT teams are working around the clock in school districts across the country to resolve technology issues as fast as possible. And even so, many kids are getting behind when their school-issued device just doesn't work for them.

Due to the myriad of tech problems a student may be facing, it's important to remain flexible in your due dates. Before assuming a student chose not to turn something in, first contact the child's parents to check in to see if there are valid reasons for nonparticipation. Offer grace by planning extensions with families who need extra time.

Check in on students who have been absent or disconnected

Has a student been absent for multiple synchronous class sessions? Perhaps a kid refuses to turn on his or her camera to allow you to see them. Or maybe a student is present and on camera, but rarely participates in lessons and discussions.

Just as you would in a face-to-face environment, do make it a point to check in with the child to see if he or she needs any help, support, or just someone to talk to. Sometimes kids struggle with the transition to online or hybrid learning because their usual routine is disrupted. Other times, families are in crisis, and it is possible that a student is dealing with something major in their lives. Always check in with parents and children who have gone missing from class or seem disconnected.

Offer a variety of assignment options

Kids aren't created equally, and neither are their home lives. In the classroom, teachers have a lot of control over assignment choices because they also can control the flow of supplies and resources that students receive. But when the learners are at home, they might not have access to construction paper, poster board, or even markers and crayons.

Never assume that a child has everything they need to complete a project or assignment. Instead, plan ahead and allow for a variety of choices so that families can choose what they can complete. For instance, an art teacher might offer kids a choice of one out of three choices for a project that tasks children with learning primary and secondary colors. Families can choose what to complete based upon what supplies they already have at home.

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Don'ts

Don't assume that all students are okay

It has been widely reported all over the news that since school has let out last March, that incidents of family violence have increased. Unfortunately, some of our students are in a dangerous situation, with many of them dealing with concerns that far outweigh getting good grades or attending online classes.

With that said, never assume that all kids are okay simply because they are learning from home. Likewise, if you notice any red flags that show a student might be in psychological distress, do not hesitate to get the appropriate help. Avoid judging children for not connecting with you in class and seek out answers and support for kids in need.

Don't talk through the entire lesson

When classes are online, it can feel awkward to listen to silence over the web as kids think or work on classwork. However, it's important to avoid talking through the entire lesson and transforming your class into the teacher-centered practices of the past!

Alternatively, plan your lessons to build in structured work time, just as you would in class. Pause to let students write in their journal, and don't worry about the awkward silence when asking students to discuss.

Don't overdo it

It might be time to accept that 2020 probably is not the year to realize your fullest teaching ambitions! This isn't to say not to try something new, because almost everything teachers are trying this year is new! However, it's important to remember the old saying not to bite off more than you can chew.

With the nature of online or hybrid schooling already proving to be overwhelming for school staff as well as children, try to keep expectations of what could be accomplished in check, and have a backup plan for your lessons should an app or activity fail.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, don't give up! This school year is undoubtedly one of the toughest that teachers and families have ever encountered. By focusing on building relationships with your students and remaining flexible in your expectations, we will all make it through this era of pandemic teaching and learning together!