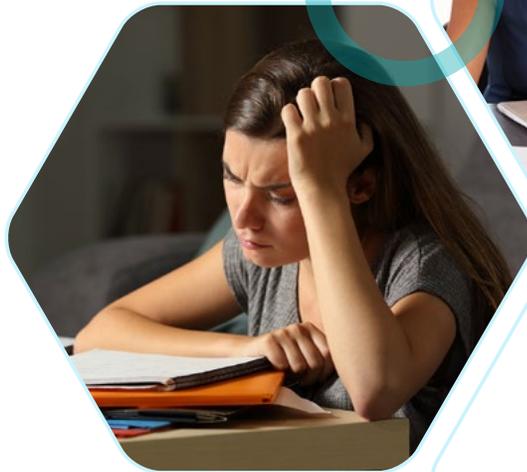


Meeting Students Where They Are: Strategies that Increase Engagement

Teaching strategies for remote, hybrid, or in-person learning environments to support all students—especially students with disabilities.

BY EMMA SIESFELD, BetterLesson Coach





Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, there has been a heightened focus on student engagement. Educators have grappled with how to keep students showing up, paying attention, and putting in a high level of work and enthusiasm, even as those students dealt with the profound trauma of a tumultuous year.

Yet we know that even before the pandemic, not all students were fully engaged and invested in school. There are myriad reasons for this, many of which are based in systemic inequities that require our attention, effort, and resources. But one important shift in our approach will need to be a greater focus on personalization and meeting students where they are—academically, socially, and now, physically (in a remote, hybrid, or in-person space).

This approach steals a page from what teachers of students with disabilities have practiced for a long time: identifying and adapting instruction to students' unique needs. While educators may not have the bandwidth to give highly personalized attention to every student, all the time, we can identify trends in student behavior and proactively design instruction to address the most common ones. By meeting students where they are, we invite them to pay attention, engage joyfully in their work, take risks, and challenge themselves.

We know that remote or hybrid instruction has posed significant new challenges. During the pandemic, familiar routines have been disrupted in myriad ways,

and students have been asked to work independently in ways they are not used to. Students with disabilities may face particular challenges with engaging in online learning due to their unique learning profiles.

The challenge is: how do we re-envision trusted in-person supports so that they are effective in any learning environment? And how do we bring these improved approaches back with us into the classroom?

As a teacher and leader with 10 years of experience and a focus on supporting students with disabilities, I deeply enjoy the work of coaching other educators. The following guide breaks down common student challenges that are barriers to engagement, and presents both in-person and remote adaptations to address them. As a BetterLesson coach, I have worked with dozens of educators in the past year on how to rework the strategies they know and love, and experiment with new ones, to find what works best for their students. While it takes some creativity and knowledge of tech tools, all are reinventions of the strategies that we as educators rely on.

These strategies work.

Attention Difficulty

Students struggle to continue listening or working for more than a few minutes at a time. Students may start assignments but not turn them in or may turn in incomplete assignments.



STRATEGIES



Break the lesson into short “learning bursts” (try 10-15 minutes), each with a different learning activity and varied ways to participate.

RATIONALE

Breaking the lesson into smaller pieces will give students natural breaks and multiple options to engage, thus helping them refocus.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Rather than giving extended independent work time, pull the class together every 10 minutes to review their progress and to address misconceptions. This can be helpful if students aren’t able to work in small groups due to social distancing.

VIRTUALLY

Try splitting synchronous sessions into smaller, more manageable chunks. Sample agenda:

- 5 min: Academic YouTube video
- 15 min: Mini-lesson using [Nearpod](#)
- 15 min: Class discussion (students unmute and work together)
- 15 min: Adaptive skill practice (ex: [IXL](#))
- 10 min: Homework preview



Incorporate a movement break mid-lesson.

RATIONALE

Students will be able to release energy physically while having time to cool off mentally.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

In keeping with social distancing protocols, allow students to stand directly beside or behind their chairs and do stretching or yoga in place.

VIRTUALLY

Have a virtual dance party (to an academic or non-academic song) and encourage students to shake out their legs and arms.



Provide high-engagement tasks, like friendly competitions.

RATIONALE

Providing a fast-paced task that incorporates peer interactions will make the work more salient and therefore help students maintain attention.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Encourage friendly competition between students by creating teams and tracking work completion or positive academic habits on the whiteboard or a team tracker on the wall.

VIRTUALLY

Use technology tools that support teacher-paced competition (like [Kahoot!](#)) or student-paced challenges (like [Quizizz](#)) to foster engagement. Both platforms allow you to share your teacher dashboard to highlight and celebrate student progress.

Slow Processing Speed

Students need more “think time” or may have trouble following complex or multi-step directions.



STRATEGIES



Provide all directions verbally and visually.

RATIONALE

Students who need more time to process can reread directions and use them as a checklist as they work through their assignments.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Hang up anchor charts or exemplars in the classroom that demonstrate expectations.

VIRTUALLY

Write expectations for participation and engagement directly into your slide deck so students know how to participate.



Explicitly teach routines and procedures that you can reuse multiple times throughout the week.

RATIONALE

Once students master routines and procedures, they will be able to devote more cognitive energy to the task at hand rather than figuring out technology and meeting expectations.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Provide an anchor chart on the wall of the classroom that displays what items students will need to have on their desks and the participation expectations for each activity you routinely do in class. Practice the transition between different activities so that students can quickly get their materials and their minds ready for the next part of class.

VIRTUALLY

Use a reduced number of technology tools and websites at first so that students get into a routine and know how to access all important sources easily. Consider adding icons or badges to their desktop or the landing page of your Learning Management System (LMS) to make this navigation easier for students.



Use a questioning strategy like Think-Pair-Share or Stop and Jot.

RATIONALE

Students will benefit from having “think time” before sharing with the class; taking time to write down their thoughts or compare thoughts with a partner will refine their thinking.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Think-Pair-Share: Have students turn and talk to their nearest partner to prepare their answers.

Stop and Jot: Have students draft their response on paper before sharing with the class.

VIRTUALLY

Think-Pair-Share: Use breakout rooms to allow students to verbally process ideas with their peers.

Stop and Jot: Have students jot down their thinking on a sticky note in [Jamboard](#) so they can prepare their thoughts before sharing.



STUDENT CHALLENGE #3

Sensory Sensitivity

Students find it overwhelming to attend and participate in class because they are seeing and hearing so many people at once.

STRATEGIES



Teach students how to focus on the most important person or thing.

RATIONALE

If it is challenging for students to keep up with the visual inputs in class (the teacher, other students' movements, their notes, and the whiteboard or projector), teaching them strategies to focus on the most important visual anchor will help decrease that input.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Teach students to turn and face other students as they participate so they know where to focus their attention. Seat students who have particular trouble with this toward the front of the classroom.

VIRTUALLY

On video tools such as Zoom, teach students to use “speaker view” and pin the teacher’s video. This view consistently displays the teacher, lowering visual processing demands.



Set up norms for how students participate.

RATIONALE

If students struggle to understand what the teacher is saying due to background noise, this will cut down on audio input and make it easier for them to attend to the teacher.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Define clear expectations for oral participation (like hand raising, one person talking at a time, or using [Socratic Seminar protocols](#)) so that students are not hearing a lot of audio input at once.

VIRTUALLY

Mute all students until they participate in the discussion. Establish norms for how students participate, like using the chat, using the “raise hand” feature on Zoom, or physically raising their hands.

Executive Functioning Needs

Students have difficulty with memory, flexible thinking, and inhibitory control.



STRATEGIES



Use a visual agenda for the day so that students can see what comes next and when.

RATIONALE

Support students with low working memory or who struggle with time management by providing them with a visual reminder of what they are responsible for and when, so they have cues in their environment to help them manage their time. Refer to these visual supports daily so that students can build the skill of using an agenda to keep up with their responsibilities.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Create a visual agenda for the wall of the classroom that helps students see the order of classes throughout the day and the organization of the week.

VIRTUALLY

Make visual agendas available to students who are learning remotely by sending printed agendas by mail to students' homes, emailing/posting agendas, or using part of class at the beginning of the month/week to help students create their own agenda they can hang up at home.



Spend the last five minutes of each class going over the schedule for the rest of the week, along with upcoming deadlines.

RATIONALE

Support students who struggle with planning and prioritizing by identifying the upcoming assignments and outlining their next steps. Reviewing their plans regularly will help students identify what is working or not working for them and can help them redesign plans so they are more effective.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Have students write their to-do list of upcoming deadlines in an agenda or on an assignment sheet and help them list out small manageable steps that they can take to complete larger assignments.

VIRTUALLY

Have students create a virtual [calendar for self-paced work](#) so they can identify what they are responsible for and break the tasks down over time. Show them how to set reminders on their phones or calendars to help them stay on track.



Allow students to open their homework and begin working on it at the end of class to ensure all students can locate and access it and have a chance to ask questions.

RATIONALE

Support students with task initiation and transitioning between activities by giving them time in class to shift their focus to their next task.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Have students take out their homework assignment and begin completing it, allowing time to address questions so that homework can be completed at home.

VIRTUALLY

Have students log into the LMS and locate the homework, ensure all students are able to access the appropriate links, and allow time for questions.



STUDENT CHALLENGE #5

Low Reading Level

Students struggle to read directions, word problems, or texts for the class, leading to low participation and low assignment completion.



STRATEGIES



Pair audio with text-heavy assignments.

RATIONALE

Students will benefit from having texts and directions read aloud, so their focus is on the concept they are learning rather than on decoding. They will grow their ability to independently complete assignments by learning how to use screen readers or extensions that read documents aloud to them.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Pair students to read together, or read complex directions and texts together as a class, pausing to summarize or point out key ideas.

VIRTUALLY

Give students access to screen reading tools, such as using [Google Read&Write](#) or adding audio to Google docs and slides with [Mote](#).



When not directly practicing or assessing basic reading skills, offer varied options for students to engage with content and demonstrate mastery.

RATIONALE

When students can engage with the concepts without having to spend the majority of their cognitive power on decoding, they have more bandwidth to understand and process the content.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Provide content in multiple formats, such as playing a video, listening to an audiobook, or reading a chapter in a novel or textbook. Give students the option of responding to assignment questions orally and scribing for them.

VIRTUALLY

Create a virtual [choice board](#) that includes links that allow students to access content through reading, listening, and watching videos so they can choose the best method for them. Allow assignments to be turned in through written or recorded video responses ([try Flipgrid](#)).

Rigidity

Students struggle to switch between the in-person and virtual settings or may get flustered or frustrated when the routine or classroom expectations change.



STRATEGIES



Preview upcoming changes.

RATIONALE

Whether there are changes to the schedule or to expectations, students who struggle with flexible thinking benefit from anticipating changes so they have time to get used to the idea of shifting their expectations.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Make visually appealing, easy-to-follow handouts that describe upcoming changes and review these with students. Give students time to practice using technology they will be accessing at home on virtual learning days.

VIRTUALLY

Post these announcements about upcoming changes in your LMS. Use part of synchronous class time to walk students through where they can find information about the changes and when they will take effect.



Practice responses to novel situations.
Ex: Talk to a student about what they can say and do if their schedule changes suddenly and they feel frustrated or anxious, then practice those actions with them.

RATIONALE

When changes happen quickly, it can induce stress for students who are rigid thinkers, decreasing their ability to problem-solve in the moment. Practicing self-talk (“this is hard, but I can figure out what to do”) or other responses can help decrease stress.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Help students identify how they feel when changes take place and [help them generate ideas for developing positive self-talk](#) in those situations.

VIRTUALLY

Make a two-column [Jamboard](#). On the left, have students generate ideas about how they typically feel in novel situations; on the right, help students generate ways they can deal with frustration or nervousness about upcoming changes.

Emotional Needs

Students seem to have low energy and difficulty motivating themselves.



STRATEGIES



Start class with a temperature check that helps you gauge where your students are emotionally.

RATIONALE

Gathering this data will help you set the tone at the beginning of class and address negativity or stress that students may feel at the outset. It can also help students identify trends in their mood over time.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Hand out an [Emojis feeling chart](#) and have students select how they are feeling.

VIRTUALLY

Start class with an anonymous [Zoom](#) or [Mentimeter](#) poll that asks students to select how they are feeling.



Incorporate daily [mindfulness strategies](#) into a [class meeting or morning meeting](#).

RATIONALE

Giving students strategies to manage their feelings can help build resilience.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Hold a daily or weekly class meeting and explain and demonstrate a mindfulness technique (like a breathing exercise) that students can use to de-escalate themselves when they are feeling big emotions.

VIRTUALLY

During virtual classes, save some time to demonstrate and practice mindfulness techniques that are supported by technology.

*These strategies are intended to help students overcome minor setbacks and learn coping skills. If you are concerned about a student's well-being, follow school- or district-mandated reporter protocols.



STUDENT CHALLENGE #8

Rising Frustration and Negative Thought Cycles

Students have become so frustrated with the difficulties of remote learning (or in-person learning, when they hit significant challenges), that they sink into spirals of “I can’t.”

STRATEGIES



Partner with students’ caretakers.

RATIONALE

Creating a partnership between school and home will allow you to gather information about what caretakers see at home and the setting in which students are participating in distance learning or completing homework. Depending on their unique situation, caretakers may also be able to provide support to students.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Send positive notes home when you see students exhibiting positive academic/social-emotional habits, or use a communication log to update caretakers on what’s going on in the class weekly.

VIRTUALLY

Meet on Zoom or over the phone with a student’s caretakers to ask for their input and to set expectations, then regularly provide updates through [phone calls or texts](#).



Frequently communicate positive actions students take.

RATIONALE

It is easy for students to get discouraged when they hit significant barriers (anything from the pandemic-related lack of normalcy and decreased social interactions to other social and emotional stressors). By highlighting positive efforts and actions from students, we can help them build a positive narrative. Focusing on actions rather than on outcomes helps emphasize that effort and perseverance are critical skills to develop this year.

IN-PERSON/HYBRID

Create a [positive news board](#) to highlight students’ positive actions. Positive news can come from the teacher or from students who nominate each other.

VIRTUALLY

Create a virtual “leaderboard” within your LMS or slide deck where you or your students can write posts about positive actions they have seen others taking. Consider using [Jamboard](#) or [Padlet](#) if you’d like students to recognize each other’s actions.

Learn more

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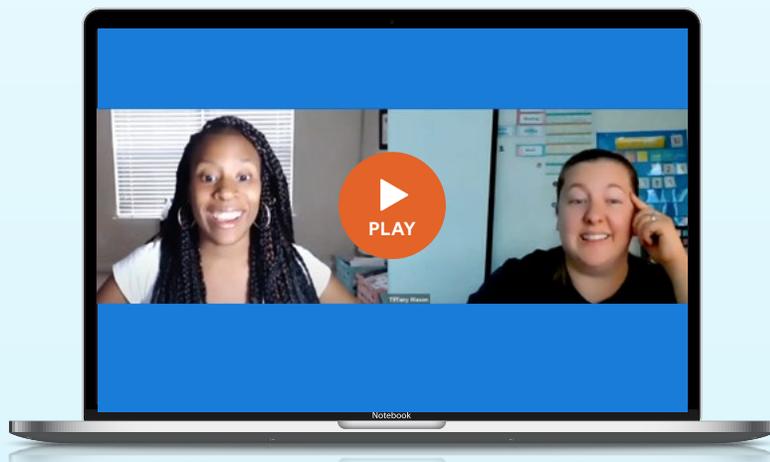
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EMMA SIESFELD

Emma Siesfeld has spent the last 11 years in public education as a teacher, coach, and administrator designing and implementing supports for students with disabilities that promote skill growth and independence. She worked as a special education teacher and teacher coach in Boston, MA. 100% of her students with disabilities worked incredibly hard to improve their skills and made Adequate Yearly Progress as measured by the state math assessment. She was also part of the founding leadership team of a high school in Los Angeles, CA, where she designed, built, and ran the special education department. 100% of the school's graduates have been accepted to four-year colleges. She is celebrating their will and resilience as many of them matriculate and advance through their first and second years in college during a global pandemic. She is currently a BetterLesson coach, working with 53 teachers and school leaders from across the United States as they experiment with new strategies and grapple with how to best support their schools and students.