
Addressing School Adjustment Problems

It is only a matter of weeks (sometimes days) after students enter a new school or begin a new year that it is clear to most teachers which students are experiencing difficulties adjusting (e.g., to new content and standards, new schools, new teachers, new classmates, etc.). It is particularly poignant to see a student who is trying hard, but is disorganized and can't keep up. If these difficulties are not addressed, student motivation for school dwindles, and behavior problems increase.

This is the time to be *proactive* and to address any problems in the earliest stages. This is the time for *staff development* to focus on the type of strategies stressed in this guidance. This is the time for *student support staff to work with teachers in their classrooms* to intervene before problems become severe and pervasive and require referrals for out-of-class interventions.

This guidance focuses on
 addressing transition problems
 enhancing engagement in learning
 working as a team to prevent problems from escalating.

Also, included are links to in-depth prevention and early intervention strategies.

SOME GUIDELINES:

Through enhanced personal contacts, build a positive working relationship with the youngster and family.
Focus first on assets (e.g. positive attributes, outside interests, hobbies, what the youngster likes at school and in class).
Ask about what the youngster doesn't like at school.
Explore the reasons for "dislikes" (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Is the youngster picked on? rejected? alienated?)
Explore other possible causal factors.
Explore what the youngster and those in the home think can be done to make things better (including extra support from a volunteer, a peer, friend, etc.).

SOME BASIC STRATEGIES

Try new strategies in the classroom – based on the best information about what is causing the problem. Enhance student engagement through (a) an emphasis on learning and enrichment options that are of current greatest interest and which the student indicates (s)he wants to and can pursue and (b) a temporary deemphasis on areas that are not of high interest.

If a student seems easily distracted, the following might be used:

- identify any specific environmental factors that distract the student and make appropriate environmental changes
- have the student work with a group of others who are task-focused
- designate a volunteer to help the student whenever s/he becomes distracted and/or starts to misbehave, and if necessary, to help the student make transitions
- allow for frequent "breaks"
- interact with the student in ways that will minimize confusion and distractions (e.g., keep conversations relatively short; talk quietly and slowly; use concrete terms; express warmth and nurturance)

If a student needs more direction, the following might be used:

develop and provide sets of specific prompts, multisensory cues, steps, etc. using oral, written, and perhaps pictorial and color-coded guides as organizational aids related to specific learning activities, materials, and daily schedules
ensure someone checks with the student frequently throughout an activity to provide additional support and guidance in concrete ways (e.g., model, demonstrate, coach)
support student's efforts related to self-monitoring and self-evaluation and provide nurturing feedback keyed to the student's progress and next steps

If the student has difficulty finishing tasks as scheduled, the following might be used:

modify the length and time demands of assignments and tests
modify the nature of the process and products (e.g., allow use of technological tools and allow for oral, audio-visual, arts and crafts, graphic, and computer generated products)

TO ACCOMPLISH THE ABOVE: Enhance use of aides, volunteers, peer tutors/coaches, mentors, those in the home, etc. not only to help support student efforts to learn and perform, but to enhance the student's social support network. Encourage structured staff discussions and staff development about what teachers can do and what other staff (mentors, student support staff, resource teachers, etc.) can do to team with teachers in their classrooms to enable school adjustment.

WHAT IF THE ABOVE STRATEGIES DON'T WORK?

If the new strategies don't work, *talk to others* at school to learn about approaches they find helpful (e.g., reach out for support/mentoring/coaching, participate with others in clusters and teams, observe how others teach in ways that effectively address differences in motivation and capability, request additional staff development on working with such youngsters).

After trying all the above, add some tutoring designed to enhance student engagement in learning and to facilitate learning of specific academic and social skills that are seen as barriers to effective classroom performance and learning.

Only after all this is done and has not worked is it time to use the school's referral processes to ask for additional support services. As such services are added, it, of course, becomes essential to coordinate them with what is going on in the classroom, school-wide, and at home.

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THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES WILL BE HELPFUL FOR STRUCTURED STAFF DISCUSSIONS:

- < Enabling Learning in the Classroom – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/enabling.htm>
- < Re-engaging Student in Learning –
<http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/quicktraining/reengagingstudents.pdf>
- < Support for Transitions to Address Barriers to Learning (Training Tutorial)
- < Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transition_tt/transindex.htm
- < Quick Find: links to resources on Classroom Focused Enabling and on Motivation

Other resources also can be readily found and accessed by topic through our Quick Find Online Clearinghouse -- see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/websrch.htm> All Center materials are available for downloading, copying, and sharing on the Center website.

And, if you can't find something you need, contact us directly:

By email — Ltaylor@ucla.edu
Toll free phone – (866) 846-4843



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