

Student Engagement Strategies

1. Focusing on Learning Goals

As described by the famed personal effectiveness coach Steven Covey, we must always “Begin with the end in mind.” This also holds true for teaching. Not only do instructors need to be clear about the student-learning targets of each lesson and unit of study, they need to share these targets with students at frequent intervals. As a Junior Achievement volunteer, you will receive a kit that identifies clear learning objectives for each lesson and unit. Educational research demonstrates that when students are aware of the learning goals of an experience, they are more likely to achieve those goals and are more likely to participate fully in the learning experience.

Your Junior Achievement curriculum is composed of quality workshop-model lesson plans with clearly stated student-learning objectives. Be sure to communicate these to students at the beginning of each lesson and remind them of the purpose behind each learning task. Here are some specific opportunities and ideas:

▲ Inform students of learning goals

As you begin your classroom work and each time you start a new lesson, state the learning outcomes clearly for students. In student-friendly language, discuss what the goals actually mean and why a person would want to know about this content.

- *Write learning goals on the board. “This is where we are headed today.”*
- *“Compound interest has really helped me to grow my savings...”*

▲ Invite self-assessment

Before launching a lesson, find out what students already know about a topic and what they might like to know. This can be done in written form or in small- or larger-group discussions. Document and discuss their background knowledge and their questions.

- *“Turn to your neighbor partner and describe what you know about assembly lines.”*
- *Ask students to share with the group. Make a list on the board of what learners already know about the topic.*

▲ Frame activities in the context of learning goals

As you invite students to engage in a learning activity, clearly describe or invite student discussion about how the task relates to the stated learning goal of the lesson. Students will gain the most benefit from activities when they understand the purpose in terms of their own learning.

- *“To help us understand how the stock market works, we are going to engage in a simulation...”*
- *Ask individual students while they are working to remember why they are doing this task and what they are supposed to be learning.*

▲ Create opportunities for self-assessment and reflection

Invite students to assess themselves after they finish each learning activity. Remind students of the learning goal and invite a discussion about what learners understand or perhaps do not yet understand based on their own experience.

- *Finish the activity and ask students, “So what? How did that task relate to the learning goal we set?”*
- *As you close the lesson, ask students to write down one thing they learned and one question they still have.*

Above all, support students by providing them with a sense of purpose—why they should know this, why they should do this, and how it relates to their own lives—by talking about how the content relates to your own life.

By modeling this habit of mind—beginning with the end in mind—you will support students in developing an important life skill that can help them long after they have completed their learning with Junior Achievement.

2. Managing Learners

Though the classroom teacher is to remain with you in the classroom as a supportive partner throughout your Junior Achievement experience, you will be responsible for leading the class through a number of learning activities. These will go best if you take charge of managing the classroom confidently and clearly. Here are some strategies to help you get off on the right foot:

▲ Make connections

Introduce yourself individually to a few students before starting the class.

- *Shake students’ hands and introduce yourself.*
- *Learn some of the students’ names; the table tents or nametags provided in your kit will help.*

▲ Set a positive tone

Let students know that you are sacrificing time from your own schedule to work with them and that you are doing so because you care about their future.

- *“The Junior Achievement curriculum includes information that can help you to shape your own future. I want the best for you, so I hope you will give this learning opportunity your all.”*

▲ Rehearse procedures

Throughout the Junior Achievement lessons, there are many transitions—from whole group instruction, to pairs or small-group conversations, to the computer, and back again. Establish a procedure for getting students’ attention: This could be a hand signal, a clapping game, or a flick of the lights.

- *Plan ahead; let students know how you will call for their attention.*
- *Rehearse the procedure so students can quickly stop, look, and listen.*

- *In blended classrooms, it is important to give the students a little time to transition from the computer to you. Consider using the “One Spot” approach: Let students know that when you need their attention, you will stand in a spot you identify. Tell them at the end of your “5-4-3-2-1 countdown,” you will say, “All hands free and eyes on me.” That’s the signal that you expect hands to be off computers and everyone looking at you, ready to listen.*

▲ Expect respect

If you are talking, and students interrupt, talk, move, or otherwise distract you, wait. This signals that you expect their respect.

- *Resist the temptation to talk over students. Instead, smile and wait.*

▲ Walk around

Keep moving throughout the room. Your proximity alone is a powerful motivator that can get students engaged.

- *If a group appears distracted or off task, move closer to them with an encouraging motive, and just stand by to see what they do next.*

▲ Give immediate, clear feedback

When students are on-task, engaged and cooperating, clearly state what you appreciate about those learners’ behavior. At the same time, do not hesitate to gently, but directly address students who are making unfortunate choices.

- *“Thank you, Maristella and Vance, for taking out your pencils and starting.”*
- *“Jane, why is it that you have left your group?”*
- *“I see that Jonas and Caleb have contributed to the discussion board.”*

▲ Press reset

If a majority of the students’ behavior is not conducive to learning, stop everyone. Point out the problem to the group; share your concern for their learning, and state your high expectations for their participation. Take a few seconds of silence to regroup before re-starting.

- *“This is not going as I had planned...”*
- *“What do you think we need to change here?”*

If students test you, please do not take their behavior personally. It is children’s nature to push limits; it is adults’ responsibility to stand firm. Let the learners know how your education helped you gain access to a successful career and that you hope the same for them. Point out how respecting their teachers and school will open doors to future opportunities.

3. Facilitating Discussions

The Junior Achievement curriculum is designed to promote students’ thinking through engagement in discussions. As the guest teacher, you will be facilitating a number of conversations with large and small groups. You can effectively promote student thinking in the context of these discussions by setting an empathetic tone, asking open-ended questions, creating opportunities for paired sharing, remaining unbiased, and demonstrating patience.

▲ Empathetic tone

When students feel safe to share their ideas and confident that divergent opinions will be respected, they will comfortably share their thinking with the larger group. You can create a safe space for discussion by emphasizing the value of respecting peers' thinking.

- *“Thank you, Jasmine, for helping us to think about this issue in a new way.”*
- *“Wow! I never thought of that before. Isn't it wonderful that we each have our own unique perspective?”*

▲ Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions could be answered with a variety of multi-word responses rather than a quick yes or no; these leave the most room for students' original ideas and personal insights. You might try these open-ended question stems:

- *“What can you tell me about the zones in your city?”*
- *“What do you think about the stock market?”*
- *“Why might manufacturers want to use an assembly line?”*

▲ Paired sharing

Inviting brief (30 seconds) paired sharing is a wonderful way to engage all learners in thinking and talking about the topic at hand. After posing a question, ask the students to “turn and talk” to a shoulder partner.

After giving everyone a few minutes to share in pairs, call the group back together and invite whomever you like to tell the class what she or her partner said. This structure can build students' confidence to speak before the class.

▲ Unbiased facilitation

After a student shares, resist the temptation to affirm or disagree with their comment—instead, turn that job over to the group. This keeps the discussion rolling and delegates the thinking and evaluating to the students. Of course, you do not want to leave misconceptions unaddressed, but see how far the students can get on their own before jumping in to correct.

- *“What do you all think about what Audrey just said?”*
- *“Does everyone agree with Derek's idea?”*

▲ Patience

Research shows that if we offer students time to think after asking them a question, we will be rewarded with more thoughtful, complex responses. Even if a few hands are promptly raised in the air, feel free to pause before calling on anyone. If no one raises a hand, keep waiting. Avoid answering your own questions, which will signal to students that they are off the hook.

- *After you pose a question, silently count to 10 in your own head before considering whom to call on.*

Practicing these discussion facilitation skills will signal to students that you respect them, trust them to have good ideas, and want to hear what they have to say. Share with students the

importance of thoughtful discussion in your work and home life, and encourage them to practice and develop this essential skill.

4. Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement—recognizing and acknowledging productive behavior—is a key strategy for every parent, teacher, employee, or partner. Positive reinforcement builds self-esteem by encouraging people to make wise choices. With students, positive reinforcement promotes positive learning behavior.

While serving as a Junior Achievement volunteer, you will have many opportunities to practice positive reinforcement, that is, to offer prompt, specific and authentic feedback to students about their classroom behavior. Here are some key ideas to remember:

▲ Prompt

Students have the greatest opportunity to respond to and integrate feedback if they receive it promptly. Catch them in the act of being effective learners and share that information publicly. This will motivate students to keep up the good work and remind others of the task at hand and the expected behavior.

- *“I see everyone at table three has their books open and is getting started with the reading; what a wise choice to make good use of this learning time.”*
- *“Thank you, José, for gathering your materials so quietly.”*

▲ Specific

When offering positive reinforcement, we are most effective when we describe what we see and appreciate about students’ behavior, rather than using vague descriptors like, “Well done,” or “Good job.”

- *“I appreciate how you are waiting patiently in your seats while we pass out the game pieces.”*
- *“These group members did a wonderful job explaining why they think the bank belongs in this zone of the city; they have three specific reasons.”*

▲ Authentic

Be truthful with students about what you actually observe; false flattery will not help your credibility. You also can invite students to adjust their behavior with carefully stated observations.

- *“In this group, I hear Adrienne and Shane sharing a lot of interesting ideas, and I am wondering what Mike and Gabe are thinking about, since the two of you have been so quiet.”*

▲ Behavior

Remember to comment on students’ behavior (“You are sitting still, with your eyes on me, clearly ready to learn”), rather than evaluating their character, (“Good girl!”)

- *“Wow! Everyone on the right side of the classroom is sitting up tall looking at me, quiet and ready to listen.”*

When communicating with students about their behavior look them in the eye, speak slowly in a soft voice and offer a warm smile. This will demonstrate the authenticity of your message. If some students are making poor choices or distracting the group, resist the temptation to let them draw your attention away from the many learners making good choices. Maintain your focus on what is going well. This alone will signal to the group that you reward positive participation, rather than get distracted by off-task behavior.

In addition to practicing positive reinforcement in your Junior Achievement classes, feel free to give it a try at work and at home. We all appreciate being acknowledged for what we are doing right!

5. Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

As a Junior Achievement volunteer, you are likely to be working with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. For example, since 1996, Colorado's student population has increased by 16 percent; over that same time period, the population of English language learners in schools grew by 297 percent. In addition to speaking Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, Hmong, Arabic, Tagalog, or other languages, these learners bring with them an array of cultural experiences. Some culturally and linguistically diverse learners were born here in the United States, while others may have spent their early lives overseas. Some already have received extensive schooling in their native tongue, while others may have only recently gained access to formal education. This is a diverse, growing segment of our school population. To meet the needs of our diverse student population, here are some important points to consider:

▲ Take a positive stance towards learners

Strive to learn about and understand as much as you can about students' cultural, language, and educational backgrounds; look for ways to build on students' strengths. Be confident that all students can learn, and structure learning activities to demonstrate this belief.

- *"Thank you, José, for gathering your materials so quietly." Ask students about themselves, "What languages do you know?" then affirm how fortunate they are to be bi- or trilingual.*
- *Ask students to compare U.S. culture to others they have experienced. You might ask, "How are businesses in Mexico different from businesses here?"*

▲ Build an empathetic, collaborative community of learners

Demonstrate with your teaching style that all students' backgrounds and beliefs deserve respect. Model and expect students to actively listen to one another and seek to understand peers' thinking and needs.

- *Talk about how much you learn from people different from yourself.*
- *Invite students to discuss issues in small groups, then share out.*

▲ Create purposeful learning experiences

In planning, consider students' language and academic backgrounds and find ways to connect the content with learners' background knowledge, interests, and language. Use this information

to help you think about the ways that you can connect students' prior knowledge to the topic of study. Have them draw on their experiences in the United States as well as abroad, using English. Also, ask them to teach you related terms in their native languages.

- *“What does Mexico export to the United States.?”*
- *Learn and use a few important content-related terms in Spanish (or other languages).*

▲ Support students' language learning

Reinforce language with visual aids or kinesthetic movements. Explicitly teach related, important vocabulary in small doses. Encourage students to discuss the content in their native language. Support students in developing the confidence to ask questions.

- *Bring in pictures or books with photos to help you introduce key ideas.*
- *Review vocabulary terms before, during, and after launching the lesson.*

▲ Be flexible

Your goal is student learning. The lesson plan may need to be modified to adapt to the needs of the group.

- *Slow down your pacing to ensure all students understand the main ideas and vocabulary.*
- *Modify an activity to make it more authentic to students' culture. When discussing commodities, for example, talk about foods they know and enjoy.*

Above all, expect every student to be an engaged learner. Show that you care by showing support for anyone who appears not to be involved. Enjoy learning about the unique students in your class; they are a glimpse into the future of our nation.

(Adapted from Klaus-Quinlan, Moker and Sally Nathanson-Mejia. *Bridging Words and Worlds: Effective Instruction for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners*. © 2010, PEBC.)