

Engaging the "Hard to Reach" Student

Some students are much harder to reach than others, and different factors influence their disengagement from the home environment to various academic, communication, and relationship factors. Teachers might not have control over students' home environment but can play an important role in overcoming academic, communication, and relationship barriers. Teachers can apply different strategies to strengthen teacher-student interaction and help increase student engagement: randomly calling on students; keeping track of student contributions; having live, synchronous, whole group and small group discussions; actively participating in asynchronous discussions through audio, video, or text; and implementing various ways of connecting with students even outside live virtual sessions.

1. What aspects of my teaching responsibilities have the most impact on hard to reach students?
2. How do my instructional approaches change in online environments, particularly with my harder to reach students?
3. How do my interactions with students impact their motivation and engagement in online environments?



to Consider

Some students are harder to reach than others, and blended and online learning can bring unique challenges. Various factors influence student engagement in an online environment including: challenges learning from home (e.g., internet issues, poor learning environment, insufficient learning resources), academic factors (e.g., deficits in prior knowledge), communication issues, and poor relationships with teacher or classmates. It is important to be aware of each of these factors and how they can affect students' engagement, but teachers do not always have control over all of these factors.

Strategies can be put in place to engage students who are unmotivated because of academic, communication, and relationship factors. Teachers can build a blended and online environment in which students feel confident to try, comfortable to make errors, and excited to learn. To create such an environment, students should be praised for their accomplishments, receive constructive feedback, have equal opportunities to participate in class activities, have a healthy relationship with their teacher, and feel accepted and respected. Teachers can take an active role in engaging the hard to reach students. Teachers can intentionally prepare and deliver lessons and learning material, constantly assess students' understanding of the content, maintain meaningful and frequent communication with students and parents, and call on students and parents by their names so they feel valued.

Increasing touchpoints with students is a valuable approach. Create a system for calling on students and keeping track of their contributions. When calling on students, create a safe environment in which making errors is an opportunity for learning and every idea is discussed with respect. Another strategy is having live, synchronous, whole group and small group discussions. Discussions are an excellent opportunity to strengthen teacher-student relationships. Discussions can also be conducted asynchronously. Teachers must give equal attention to all students, by frequently replying and making comments on students' posts and being careful not to answer just the same group of students every time. To develop different forms of communication skills and also make the discussion more dynamic, teachers can create activities that allow students to answer questions using text, audio, video, or even drawings. Teachers can also increase their interaction with students and parents by sending motivational messages to students or creating an email newsletter for families so they can be informed about the activities of their children's class.

Hard to reach students can be a big challenge. However, when teachers intentionally create an environment in which these students are genuinely seen and heard, there is a great chance that their engagement increases and their performance improves.

KEY Elements