



# Five Keys to Starting the School Year Strong

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**A Back-to-School Guide for Teachers and Education Leaders**

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**“Every moment in the classroom is an opportunity for students to learn something new—something about the world around them or something about the potential within them.”**

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Nobody likes to think about the dreaded **summer slide** but the fact is that too many of our students lose ground academically during these months, and may start the new school year unsteady and unready. If the **“Matthew Effect”** is a real thing when school is in session, giving those who have more resources and support at home a decided advantage over their peers, it is only more pronounced when our less-advantaged students are away from school.

**Here are five practical tips to help educators start the year strong and ensure that students recover, accelerate, and excel.**

# 01

## ASSESS

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Asking teachers to begin a new curriculum in September based on where their students were in May or June is a risky proposition. In the first place, they are rarely “their” students; a teacher may need days or weeks to get to know a new crop of students. Also, depending on the subject matter and the grade, any assessment data available from last spring may be only tangentially related to what this teacher will be teaching. If we wait until the first parent-teacher conference to get a fully realized picture of each student, we will have lost critical time that’s difficult to get back.

Ensure that teachers have plans of how to assess their incoming students so that they can serve their individual needs and give them opportunity to excel. Help them plan how they can efficiently gather that data through informal assessments, classroom surveys, individual discussions, or a learning platform that includes an assessment to measure baseline skills.



# 02

## ENGAGE

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We may be able to force people to comply with instructions, but we can't force anyone to learn, at any age. Real learning requires a willing participant, so the sooner we engage the student in the act of learning, the better off everyone will be.

Whatever the subject area and grade, the stuff of our curriculum is vitally important, and most of it has stood the test of time and proved valuable to multiple generations. Don't keep its importance hidden or take it for granted. Remember why it matters—to these children as individuals and to all of us as a society—and share that information with students and families early and often.

Consider using intriguing questions to frame units and lessons, instead of (or in addition to) traditional objectives, to pose learning as a challenge rather

than a chore—a puzzle to solve or a thing to create, that requires certain new information and skills. The things we learn in school matter because they help us do things in the world that matter to us. We can simulate that process in our classrooms.



# 03

## ACCELERATE

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No matter where you teach, the odds of every student arriving in class at the same level of preparedness, and that level being exactly what's needed to start the school year successfully, are vanishingly small. Some students will need to catch up. Some students will want to move faster. Do you have tools in place to help them accelerate, and time set aside each week for students to work individually or in small groups?

Differentiating or levelling based on student ability can be a tricky business. Without ongoing assessment and an expansive, adaptive library of content, a “levelled” product can freeze and trap students at a particular moment of time and simply reinforce where they are, rather than lifting them up and

driving them forward. The key is not only to identify each student's **Zone of Proximal Development**, but to keep them focused right in that “sweet spot” every day, pushing them gently but persistently forward as they demonstrate mastery. “What students can do” is a moving target; we need to be able to move with it. Consider investing in a platform that helps students work independently, and right at that sweet spot for their individual acceleration.



# 04

## EMPOWER

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Learning can't be passive; students have to want to learn, and they have to believe that they can. In counteracting summer slide—and, perhaps, for some students, a less-than-successful prior school year—it's vitally important to build students' sense of **self-efficacy**—their sense of having control over their life, along with a positive, growth-oriented mindset towards their ability to learn.

There are many ways to help reinforce a sense of agency and independence among students. One way is to provide regular opportunities for students to choose what content they want to read, or what topics they want to learn about, or what final products to complete as a demonstration of learning. Another way is to help them set their own goals for learning and to track their progress towards mastery. Perhaps those goals are specific to

school achievement; perhaps they are tied to life goals outside of school, such as college acceptance or some kind of career certification. If we truly believe that what we teach our students helps to prepare them for life outside of and beyond school, perhaps we can find ways to connect inside to outside more explicitly and help them see that what we want for them is what they want for themselves.



# 05 CELEBRATE

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Finally, to start the school year with strength and optimism, we need to remember to celebrate early and often, not to wait till the end of the year. Everyone needs a hurra and an attaboy now and then—children most of all. Everyone likes to get a gold star on their paper—even adults! If we do a good job of celebrating and encouraging early on, it's easier for students to go from strength to strength as the year winds on.

Celebration doesn't always have to mean cupcakes and pizza parties. It could also mean something as simple as sharing interesting student work, a thing we do in elementary school and sometimes forget to do with teenagers. And interesting work could mean far more than a good test score or a well-written essay; it could be as little as a paragraph, or even a single, interesting turn of phrase. It could be

a correct, but oddball, way of solving a math problem. It could even be an incorrect way of solving a math problem, as the teacher in this [video](#) demonstrates.

Learning is hard work, filled with mistakes and wrong turns. Making mistakes is how we learn. If we want our students to take risks—to try harder—we need to let them know that a mistake is nothing more than an opportunity to learn.

Everything that happens in the classroom is data...if we're attuned to it and know what to do with it. And every moment in the classroom is an opportunity for students to learn something new—something about the world around them or something about the potential within them, waiting to be set free.