Volunteer Guidance for Engaging Students Effectively

General Tips for Success

Jump to: How to Address Specific Situations

Some things to remember about modern high schools and other educational settings:

- Expect to see cell phones in the classroom.
- Don't be surprised if students have more casual attitudes toward authority figures.
- Students are very in tune with world events, politics, and social justice. Use this to your advantage!
- Classroom interruptions and distractions may be more common.
- Don't be surprised if some students lay their heads down.

Tried and True Techniques:

- Learn and use student names. Write them out phonetically, if necessary.
    - Correctly pronouncing their names shows that you respect the students.
- Use a raffle to encourage participation, coming prepared, and having their workbooks.
- Bring treats.
- Tell interesting and relevant stories.
    - Be vulnerable! Students love hearing about how you or others have overcome mistakes.
    - This is what sets our lessons apart from other classes and programs. You are our asset!
- Bring props to explain concepts.
- Use appropriate humor to get their attention.
- Don't lecture and don't simply read off the slides.
- Move around the room while you teach. Don't just stand in one spot.
- Recognize that you may be teaching students that are different from you. They may have very different backgrounds, life experiences, stresses, educational opportunities, and goals.
- Respect different cultural beliefs and experiences related to money.
    - Recognize that all communities do not have access to the same resources and services.
- Build rapport by developing trust and demonstrating respect with the students.
    - Ask the students questions about themselves, be interested in them.
- Treat them like young adults with valuable and valid life experiences.

Make the educator in the room your partner:

- When you get the confirmation email, reach out to the educator and ask them:
    - about the students and the classroom environment. Ask about their energy level, general engagement level, and what has worked in the past to encourage participation.
- At some point before the lesson, ask them:
    - if you can count on their participation during the presentation. During the lesson, ask them questions; ask them for examples or stories.
    - if they will be your point person for managing student behavior and disruptions. During the lesson, ask them to address issues as they arise.
        - Educators are told that this is their responsibility, but it is helpful to reinforce it with a reminder.
- At the start of each lesson, ask the educator to introduce you and explain why you are there, why the information you will be teaching is important, and what sort of behavior they expect out of the students while you are there.
- After a visit to the classroom, ask the educator for feedback or tips for next time.

How to Address Specific Situations with Students

Jump to:

The students aren't interested in the lessons
Students are having side conversations
Students are getting antsy or bored
The attendance is inconsistent
Students are sleeping or have their heads down
Students have learning disabilities or have other special needs
There is a language barrier between you and the students
There are disruptions in the classroom or nearby area
Students are disrespectful

The students aren't interested in the lessons:

- Make a point to emphasize the power of the knowledge they can gain through these lessons.
    - Many students feel like what they learn in school is irrelevant to their daily lives. Show them how these lessons are different.
- Ask lots of questions and pay attention to what the students get most excited to talk about.
    - As long as the conversation is still generally on topic, let the students lead you.
    - Ask specific students questions and call on them by name, rather than posing questions to the whole group.
- Distill the lesson down to the main concepts. Focus on what they are interested in, skip what is not essential.
    - It's okay if you don't cover all the concepts in exactly the way it is laid out in the presentation. It is okay if you don't make it all the way through the lesson.
    - The goal is for the students get *something* out of the lessons. Pushing through a whole lesson that the students don't retain because they weren't engaged does not serve the students' needs.
    - Don't skip the activities. Activities are more engaging than reading off of slides.
        - Walk between the desks while students are completing the activities to make sure that they are working on them and to answer any questions.

Students are having side conversations:

- Try to pull them back in. Use humor and ask the students if they are talking about the question or discussion prompt on the slide.
- Walk around the room as you teach and spend a few seconds standing by the desks of the students that are not paying attention. That usually helps to quiet them down.
- Head off potential issues at the beginning by setting ground rules. Take just a few minutes to discuss or review the ground rules at the start of the lessons.
    - Get student buy-in by asking them what they think the ground rules should be.

Students are getting antsy or bored:

- 90 minutes can be a long time for students to sit still and listen. Set your expectations realistically.
- Take a 2 minute break part way through and have the students stand up and stretch.
- Use a raffle or toss treats out to students that are participating.
- Have them complete activities in pairs or groups.

The attendance is inconsistent:

- Do a brief review at the start of the lesson.
- Make sure that all students have a workbook.
- Read the room. If students seem lost or confused, back up and review.
- Ask students who were present previously if they can answer their peers questions or basic review questions, rather than answering everything yourself.

Students are sleeping or have their heads down:

- Generally, our advice is to let them sleep. If they are so tired that they are falling asleep in class, then they didn't get enough sleep the night before. It's not up to us to judge or make assumptions about why.
- Some students that lay their heads down are still listening. You may find that they still answer questions or raise their hands occasionally. Keep moving forward and they will retain the information.
- If the educator does not want their students to lay their heads down, then they will manage it.
- Avoid touching the students to wake them up, especially if you are volunteering in a cross-cultural setting.

Students have learning disabilities or have other special needs:

- When we schedule lessons with special education classes, we work with the educator to ensure that the students are prepared before you arrive. You will always know ahead of time when you are volunteering with a special education class.
- We encourage the educator to review the concepts and vocabulary from the lessons ahead of your presentations, so that the students are more familiar.
- Depending on the students' capabilities, some of the activities may be more difficult for them to complete.
    - Ideally the educator will identify which ones to skip ahead of time. If not, use your best judgement once you get to know the students and talk with the educator after your first session.
- It can be helpful to focus more on big concepts, rather than on covering each slide in the presentation. Don't get hung up on the details, just try to make sure that the students walk away understanding the big ideas.
    - It is okay to simplify ideas in order to improve understanding.
- You find that you are teaching a mainstream class, but that there is a special needs student in that class, do your best to engage them the same way you would a student without special needs.
    - After your first session, ask the educator for advice on how best to engage that student.

There is a language barrier between you and the students:

- When we schedule lessons with ELL (English Language Learners) or ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, we work with the educator to ensure that the students are prepared before you arrive. You will always know ahead of time when you are volunteering with an ELL or ESL class.
- We encourage the educator to review the concepts and vocabulary from the lessons ahead of your presentations, so that the students are more familiar.
- Depending on the students' level of English fluency, some of the activities may be more difficult for them to complete.
    - Ideally the educator will identify which ones to skip ahead of time. If not, use your best judgement once you get to know the students and talk with the educator after your first session.
- It can be helpful to focus more on big concepts, rather than on covering each slide in the presentation. Don't get hung up on the details, just try to make sure that the students walk away understanding the big ideas.

There are disruptions in the classroom or nearby area:

- Do your best to tune them out and keep teaching.
- Teach to those that are paying attention and present.
- Consider asking the students who are trying to learn to move their desks closer to you and let the other students move to another part of the room.
- Ask the educator to help minimize disruptions.
- Do not put yourself in the middle of an altercation.

Students are disrespectful:

- Head off potential issues at the beginning by setting ground rules. Take just a few minutes to discuss or review the ground rules at the start of the lessons.
    - Get student buy-in by asking them what they think the ground rules should be.
- Stay calm. Always.
- Try not to take it personally, even if it is directed at you.
- Do not escalate the situation.
- Ask the teacher to intervene.

Find more videos and resources in the SecureFutures Resource Library!

https://securefutures.org/resource-library-securefutures/