Essential Questions 101

An Evidence-Based Practice for Student Engagement.

Student Engagement

One of the most frequently discussed topics in classrooms and schools is student engagement. When you do a Google search for "Student Engagement Strategies" you get almost two million hits that range from why it's important to blog after blog that list engagement strategies. When you review these, one pattern that you can clearly see is that they mostly focus on tasks, listing general answers like use technology, play games, etc.

But they also miss an important engagement strategy - helping students understand "What's In It For Me (WIIFM)". The missed opportunity occurs at the start of the lesson and the process used to share your Essential Question.



The Why Is Essential

One of the first key hurdles to learning is to set the stage for why what students are about to learn is important. As teachers, many of us have said to our students that the reason you need to learn this is... because it is in the standard, you will use it next year, or you will be tested on it at the end of the year. While all of these statements are technically true, in most cases all of these statements decrease students' internal motivation and push their disengagement. The standards and assessment are important to narrow down what is taught, but how we help students find their purpose is on us. Two studies and findings support this:

The importance of the "Why" was demonstrated in a study (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008) of several hundred elementary and middle school students. The researchers concluded that choice alone did less to support engagement than showing students how what they're learning is important to them and connects to real life.

In addition, another study (Dean et al, 2012) found that the two most powerful strategies to employ to connect learning with the why were to 1) provide students with information at the outset of a lesson about where a lesson is going that connects what students know with what they will learn and 2) use advance organizers - stories, pictures, concept maps, and other introductory materials to help students focus on learning.

The First Engagement Strategy - Using Essential Questions to Communicate Expectations



"The starting place for all effective instruction is designing and communicating clear Learning Goals."

- Marzano (2009)

What is a Learning Goal?

Learning Goals, as defined in the quote above have been known by many names. These include Lesson Objectives, Learning Targets, SWBAT, and I Can Statements. In all of these different labels, the process begins with looking at your grade-level standards. While the label may be different, the end product is the same - Learning Goals are a representation of your learning expectations. The conversation often ends here, but the second part of Marzano's quote focuses on how these expectations are communicated. This process of communication provides an important opportunity for your first engagement strategy.

It Is All About Essential Questions

Using Essential Questions to communicate your expectations is an evidence-based practice that was seen in 97% of schools evaluated by the Education Consortium. These schools were selected because they achieved 85%+ overall proficiency with a student demographic that consisted of at least 50% AALANA (African American, Latinx American, Native American) students and 50% of their students qualifying for free and reduced lunch as well. In these schools, teachers converted their Learning Goals into Essential Questions.

Excerpt from https://learningfocused.com/essential-questions/



✔ One thing from the article that affirms your prior knowledge:

❗ One thing from the article that surprises you:

❓ One thing from the article you wish to know more about: