

Turn Students into Teachers

One of the best ways to know whether you've mastered something is to try to teach it. Give students that opportunity. Assign each pupil in a class a different aspect of the broader topic you're studying – and then have them take turns teaching what they've learned to their classmates. And once they've got it down, give them a wider audience by inviting other classes, teachers, parents, or school administrators to learn what they have to teach.

At the start of a school term, ask students about their individual passions and areas of expertise. Keep a list of your experts, and then call upon them as needed throughout the term.

Apply the 3-Part Type I Test for Homework

- Am I offering students **autonomy** over how and when to do this work?
- Does this assignment promote **mastery** by offering a novel, engaging task (as opposed to rote reformulation of something already covered in class)?
- Do my students understand the **purpose** of this assignment? That is, can they see how doing this additional activity at home contributes to the larger enterprise in which the class is engaged?

Montessori Approach

Build on students' natural curiosity and innate desire to learn with these basic tenets:

- Children naturally engage in self-directed learning and independent study
- Teachers should act as observers and facilitators of that learning, and not as lecturers or commanders
- Children are naturally inclined to experience periods of intense focus, concentration, and flow and adults should do their best not to interrupt.

Give Students Genuine Autonomy

Work from the assumption that all human beings are naturally curious and that the best kind of learning happens when it's initiated and pursued by the one doing the learning. Give students total control over the task, time, and technique of their learning. Teachers and staff are there to help them make things happen.

Have a FedEx Day

Set aside an entire school day and ask kids to come up with a problem to solve or a project to tackle. In advance, help them collect the tools, information, and supplies they might need. Then let them have at it. The next morning, ask them to deliver – by reporting back to the class on their discoveries and experiences. Kids come up with the projects themselves, and the reward at the end of the day is the chance to share what they've created all they've learned along the way.

The Tinkering School

Let students play around with interesting stuff and build cool things. Operate from a few basic assumptions:

Kids are More Capable Than

They Know – the use of real tools to tackle real problems creates a unique atmosphere of trust and responsibility. Empower tinkers with tools, autonomy, and space. Big responsibilities build competency and leave lasting memories.

The Freedom to Fail is Essential

– every project has setbacks; if it goes right the first time you've just learned how to follow instructions. A failure-positive atmosphere allows children to play in the face of adversity.

It can be Done Bigger and Bolder

– Make big art, build big things, and go amazing places.

Offer Praise . . . **The Right Way**

Praise Effort and Strategy, not Intelligence. Children who are praised for “being smart” often believe that every encounter is a test of whether they really are, so they resist new challenges and choose the easiest path. Kids who understand that effort and hard work lead to mastery and growth are more willing to take on new, difficult tasks.

Make Praise Specific. Give useful information about performance. Instead of bathing them in generalities, tell them specifically what they’ve done that’s noteworthy.

Praise in Private. Praise is feedback – not an award ceremony. That’s why it’s often best to offer it one-on-one.

Offer Praise Only When There’s a Good Reason for It. Be sincere – or keep quiet. If you overpraise, kids regard it as dishonest and unearned. Plus, overpraising becomes another “if-then” reward that makes earning praise, rather than moving towards mastery, the objective.

Big Picture Learning

Create places that cultivate engagement rather than demand compliance. Big Picture kids get the basics. But they also use those basics and acquire other skills by doing real work in the community – all under the guidance of an experienced adult tutor. Big Picture kids are assessed the way adults are – on work performance, individual presentations, effort, attitude, and behavior on the job.

Try DIY Report Cards

At the beginning of a semester, ask students to list their top learning goals. Then, at the end of the semester, ask them to create their own report cards along with a one- or two-paragraph review of their progress. Where did they succeed? Where did they fall short? What more do they need to learn? Once students have completed their DIY report cards, show them the teacher's report card, and let the comparison of the two be the start of a conversation on how they are doing on their path toward mastery.

Take a Class From the Unschoolers

Unschoolers – families that don't use a formal curriculum and instead allow their children to explore and learn what interests them. They promote autonomy by allowing youngsters to decide what they learn and how they learn it. They encourage mastery by allowing children to spend as long as they'd like and to go as deep as they desire on the topics that interest them. Consider ways to incorporate the philosophy into your school.

A Radical Dose of Autonomy

Turn the "one size fits all" approach of conventional schools on its head. Give each student an advisor to act as their personal coach, helping her/him come up with their own learning goals. "School" consists of a mixture of class time & self-created independent study projects, along with community service devised by the students. Students gain a clear sense that their learning has a real-world purpose, and, instead of chasing grades, receive frequent, informal feedback from advisors, teachers, and peers.

Help Kids See the Big Picture

In education systems tilted toward standardized tests, grades, and "if-then" rewards, students often have no idea why they're doing what they're doing. Turn that around by helping them glimpse the big picture. Whatever they're studying, be sure they can answer these questions: *Why am I learning this? How is it relevant to the world I live in now?* If they're learning Spanish, take them to an office, a store, or a community center where they can actually speak the language. If they're studying geometry, have them draw up architectural plans for an addition to your school. If they're taking history, ask them to apply what they've learned to an event in the news. Think of it as the fourth R: reading, writing, arithmetic . . . and relevance.