

Classroom consistency, engagement maximize instructional time

School leaders might be inclined to think that longer school days and school years are needed to ensure students are adequately educated and prepared. However, by imploring teachers to adopt a consistent classroom approach regardless of the subject matter, you can effectively add time into the lesson within the standard period.

Key points

- Consistent classroom instruction amplifies learning.
- Beginning of the lesson should be uniform across subjects.
- Ensure student engagement, frequent checks for understanding. ■

“It’s not about the amount of time; it’s about how the time is being used in the classroom,” said Mel Riddile, associate director for high school services for the National Association of Secondary School Principals in Reston, Va. “We tend to waste a considerable

amount of time in the classroom.”

With many states adopting the Common Core State Standards, it’s clear that “teachers cannot teach both higher level content and cross-content literacy standards without more instructional time,” Riddile said, “Teaching bell-to-bell is now a minimum expectation.”

Riddile provided the following tips for improving classroom instruction:

- **Strive for consistency.** Most of the negative interactions between teachers and students during the school day occur during transitions. “If we can build the capacity of staff to have a consistent instructional approach across the school, we can reduce teacher stress and negative interactions,” Riddile said. Teachers should have defined instructional practices similar to attendance, discipline, and registration procedures. “It’s ironic we have standard defined practices except in the one area where we need them, and that’s instructionally,” he said.

- **Strengthen the start.** The beginning is the most important part of the lesson. However, Riddile noted, few teachers are trained on how to begin or end a class. The beginning should typically involve the teacher greeting the students at the door. When the students enter the class, they will begin working on an assignment. If every teacher is doing this, the students can get into the routine within two weeks and automatically begin working on the lesson.

- **Engage students.** Make the most of instructional time by ramping up student engagement — not just with the teacher, but with their peers as well. “When I go into a classroom with a principal, I’ll ask her to count the number of students who are engaged versus the number who aren’t,” Riddile said. “If teachers are calling only on students who raise their hand, they will typically get about 20 percent of the class participating.” When you stop calling only on students who raise their hand, you can see a difference in the type of engagement. Set up protocols where any student can be called on at any time. Although some teachers adhere to that system, it’s usually not consistent throughout the school. To increase engagement, teachers should tell students not to speak out when they hear a question. They can’t opt-out of answering, but they can ask another student for a “life line” if they need help. If another student answers correctly, the original student should repeat the answer. It’s often difficult to ascertain whether a student is engaged when completing a worksheet. “We need to watch while students are working, which is a reversal of what goes on in many high school classes,” Riddile said.

- **Check for understanding.** The teacher should stop every five minutes during the standard classroom lecture to check for understanding. If the teacher has students working in groups through cooperative learning, Riddile advised them to stop every 15 minutes in addition to walking around and checking with students individually. “Students can identify teachers who frequently stopped and checked with them as the ones who care the most about them,” Riddile said. “When teachers check for understanding, it changes the student’s perception of how much the teachers care. It improves their academic performance as well as teacher-student relationships.”

- **End on a high note.** If teachers use a short quiz or another activity at the end of class that causes students to remember what they just learned, they can increase student retention of the lesson by 50 percent.

- **Don’t expect overnight changes.** Revamping instructional time often requires a cultural change in the classroom. If staff collaboration is routine at your school, it’s often easier to adjust to consistent classroom instructional practices. However, it can be foreign to the culture of other schools. “It may sound simple, but it’s almost like transplanted organs that are so foreign to the body that they’re rejected,” Riddile said.

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