



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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Help students take charge of their literacy learning

In these columns I've been discussing big ideas that changed my thinking as an educator. My fifth big idea is helping students to take charge of their own literacy learning. As a teacher, I've had the disappointing experience of feeling that I was dragging my students along during a lesson. I've also had the exhilarating feeling of working with students who wanted to learn something for themselves.

How do we begin to help students take control of their own literacy learning? I believe this can happen when we as teachers communicate a vision of excellence in reading and writing, make goals for learning clear, provide instruction related to these goals, and include ample opportunity for student self-assessment and goal setting.

I've learned that the starting point in this quest is for teachers to achieve clarity about what constitutes excellent reading and writing in their classrooms. What habits and attitudes would you like students to have? What should they know and be able to do? The process of developing clear expectations works especially well if it takes place as part of building your school's staircase curriculum, a big idea I addressed in my third column.

"I Can" statements

In the past, teachers often assumed that students knew or would be able to infer what was expected of them. These are not safe assumptions, especially in classrooms with many students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. I believe that teachers should be proactive in taking specific steps to make their expectations clear to students.

An excellent approach for this purpose centers on the use of "I Can" statements to communicate expected outcomes to students. An "I Can" statement is a benchmark (end-of-year outcome) worded in student-friendly language.

I encourage teachers to write benchmarks in professional language, so that they can use terms such as *comprehension monitoring* that capture their ideas precisely. However, these benchmarks may require rewording before they can be readily understood by students, particularly those in the lower grades.

For example, kindergarten teachers may agree on the following benchmark: Students will have the habit of daily reading. To communicate this idea to students, teachers might use an "I Can" statement such as the following: "I can find a book that I enjoy reading by myself or with a partner."

"I Can" statements can be especially effective as visual reminders of important benchmarks when posted in a prominent location in the classroom, easily noticed by the teacher and students. One teacher I

know posted her "I Can" statements in large print above the whiteboard at the front of the class. She told me that the "I Can" statements were not just for her students, saying, "They also remind me of the important things that I'm supposed to be teaching."

You may find it helpful to introduce just one "I Can" statement at a time. Discuss the statement with students and then teach a lesson addressing that "I Can" statement. Suppose that the statement is "I can determine important information when I read." Whenever you teach a lesson focusing on determining importance, you will point to the "I Can" statement and remind students that this lesson will help them to meet that particular learning goal.

Student-friendly rubrics

You've probably noticed from the examples that "I Can" statements may be quite general. Details of your expectations for students can be captured in student-friendly rubrics. The purpose of a student-friendly rubric is to give students a clear picture of performance that exceeds, meets, or does not yet meet the benchmark. Some teachers use the terms *exceeding*, *meeting*, and *approaching* or *working on* to describe these different levels of performance.

Teachers may choose to develop rubrics through discussions with their students. Or they may prefer to develop rubrics in consultation with their colleagues, then introduce the rubrics to their students. I've seen teachers find success with both of these approaches.

It works well to acquaint students with rubrics by starting with performances that are rather easy to assess. For example, a second-grade teacher began by having her students create a rubric

for the Author's Chair. Students came up with suggestions such as reading the piece loudly enough to be heard by the whole class, holding the book up to show the class the illustrations, and remembering to choose three classmates to ask questions or make comments. Later, the teacher involved the children in developing rubrics for performances that were more difficult to assess: written responses to literature and participation in literature discussions.

You may want to post the student-friendly rubric right beneath its matching "I Can" statement. Work with students to design a self-assessment form based on the rubric. Give students an opportunity to share their progress with others by posting examples of their work along with their completed self-assessment forms. Be sure the forms include space for students to write both about what they have done well and what they would like to be able to do better. The latter become goals for students to pursue in the weeks ahead.

Portfolios

I see portfolios as a way of helping teachers return to the most important purpose for assessment: gathering the information needed to provide instruction tailored to student needs. Portfolios are an excellent means of organizing examples of students' work along with their completed self-assessment and goal-setting forms. Through their analyses of portfolios, teachers can monitor students' progress in meeting benchmarks and adjust instruction for the whole class, small groups, and individuals.

For students, portfolios can serve the purpose of allowing them to see the progress they are making as readers and writers, on their own terms and as assessed according to the student-friendly rubrics. Through regularly scheduled portfolio reviews and conferences, students become active participants in an ongoing classroom cycle of goal setting, learning, and assessing. In addition, they gain insights about their strengths, challenges, and preferences as readers and writers.

Practical tips

Here are three practical tips you can use in the classroom to help implement the ideas introduced above.

1. Use discussion charts. I often see charts indicating that teachers have conducted a discussion with their students based on the following questions: "What do good readers do?" and "What

do good writers do?" These discussions are a wonderful way to help students understand what it means to be an excellent reader and writer.

But consider the situation of the second-grade teacher who found that her students equated good writing with simply correct spelling and punctuation. This teacher introduced mini-lessons based on children's literature to broaden students' understandings to encompass the ideas that good writers create exciting stories, use vivid descriptions, and leave the imprint of their own unique styles or voices.

As students discussed each new idea about good writing, the teacher added these ideas to the chart. From time to time throughout the year, she returned to the chart to remind students of the many dimensions of good writing they now recognized.

2. Go beyond simple checklists. Perhaps you have already discovered, as I have, that a simple checklist isn't enough to support students' self-assessment. It's too easy for students to quickly check off every item and then conclude that they have met all the criteria in the rubric.

To get the most from a checklist, require that students identify the evidence related to each item. For example, if one of the items on the checklist is an interesting lead, students should highlight or place a sticky note by the relevant lines in their piece.

3. Create a year-long schedule. This allows you to keep yourself and your students on track with portfolios. Most teachers have students add to their portfolios at least once a quarter. Give students a working folder in which they can put the work they believe provides strong evidence of their progress in addressing the "I Can" statements and rubrics.

At the scheduled time each quarter, have students go through their working folders to select the items to be placed in their portfolios. Send the portfolios home with students, or send home only the items chosen for that quarter. Teach students how to present their portfolios to their parents and have them rehearse in class with a partner. Create a response sheet that allows parents to write their children a brief message of celebration and encouragement.

All of these steps can help students take control of their own literacy learning. If you have ideas along these lines that you would like to share, send them to readingtoday@reading.org. ❖

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