

Advanced Concepts for a Better Future

By: Amie Canter

As an educator that has worked in both public and private schools, I have found that by establishing effective classroom management and using evolved methods of instruction, students can be successful. Though having a low student to teacher ratio in a private school increases the effectiveness of this method, I truly believe that public school teachers that strive for continuous improvement in our education system and are eager to provide quality education can make it an effective way of teaching as well. In the following paragraphs, I will outline the basics of a properly functioning classroom. Then I will engage you in a new way of thinking about what it means to be a *teacher*.

The classroom management system that I found to be most effective has been taught for years to educators by Harry Wong. His book, "The First Days of School", helped me as a beginning teacher to establish the right policies, procedures, and overall classroom management model. It also helped me to understand that each class should be managed differently each year. Many teachers establish a set of policies, procedures, rules, and consequences that they put in place each year no matter how different their students may be. Understanding that students are individuals that think and act differently and knowing that each class, based on each student's abilities, both academically and behaviorally is the driving force in knowing what policies, procedures, rules and consequences are needed to be a successful classroom. Teachers should understand that having a "blanket" set of standards does not cover the needs of today's classrooms. Having the desire and ability as an educator to truly know your students is key to being a successful teacher.

Once I understood how pivotal it was to know my students, recognize them as individuals, and learned to observe my class and their interactions as a social group, I was able to develop a new set of policies, procedures, rules and consequences *with* my class. Allowing them to participate in the establishment of these core classroom morals and values, promotes their eagerness to uphold them. You would be surprised to see how excited students become when they realize that their thoughts and feelings are valued by their teacher. Nothing less than this should be expected by students though and it saddens me to know that many educators do not consider the thoughts of their students valuable.

Now that classroom management was established for the year, I could focus on each student's academic strengths and weaknesses. Truly understanding each student's needs for success can only be established through more one on one and small group interactions. Even as a public school teacher that faced 25+ students, identifying

students that were below proficient in a subject area was key to knowing how to turn that into a strength. Once I knew which students had challenges, I could incorporate times in the daily schedule where students worked either independently or in groups. Before I began my lesson plans, I first established who my strongest academic students were, which students required some assistance, and which students needed critical attention. I have found that changing up how groups are formulated maintains student interests. The most effective method of creating groups that I have utilized thus far is allowing the strongest students to lead small groups of students that only require some help. Assigning a strong student to three or four students that need some attention not only promotes leadership qualities in students, but sometimes students communicate ideas and concepts more effectively amongst themselves. This then allows me as the teacher to form a small group of critical students that need my direct attention.

Once you have identified the needs of students considered below proficient or at risk of not meeting grade level proficiency, it is best practice to assess students and use that data to drive your instruction. Having a firm understanding of their weaknesses and developing a plan on how to help them meet grade level proficiency is key when notifying parents. It is very important to know the student's academic history and any past reported challenges and interventions that were used and if they were found effective. When speaking with the parents during the planned conference, it is best practice to document all topics discussed. Explaining to parents not only the weaknesses their child is facing but highlighting their strengths is necessary to build a positive relationship with continuous communication. Not only should the teacher explain both strengths and weaknesses, they should indicate the interventions that are being put in place to help that child meet proficiency. Interventions should include what is being done at school and/or in the classroom, but also what needs to be done at home to help bridge the gap. Parents should also be "in the know" regarding their child's progress. Even as a private school teacher where I no longer have access to special education teachers that can draw up an IEP, I have used my experience as a public school teacher (Onslow County Schools) to implement a Personalized Educational Plan (PEP). This allows me as a general education teacher to outline academic weaknesses, convert those as goals according to the Virginia Standards of Learning, and then create interventions to help them meet grade level proficiency. This document operates similarly to an IEP in that it allows teachers to document academic needs, track progress data, and create a plan for each student as needed. Not only that, but the parents are also more aware of their child's academic progress (beyond just a report card) and then this document can travel to the child's next school and provide accurate history for future teachers.

Continuing with my thoughts regarding parent communication, I found that parents feel more connected with the classroom when I emailed daily and utilized Classdojo.com. I have found it easier as a teacher to communicate my expectations for homework via email. It also ensures that the parents have received homework

requirements for the day and also allows me to send reminders regarding quizzes/test, upcoming field trips, and other school events. As both a public and private school teacher, I have always communicated at a high volume with parents through email. I can honestly say that this is a very effective way to communicate with parents and allows you to maintain an electronic log of communication. Beyond just communicating day to day information, I place high value on face to face conferences regarding student progress, especially when the student is at risk of not meeting grade level proficiency. Conferences should always be planned and the teacher should have a prepared conference form to document who attended, what topics were discussed, and any discussions reached and agreed upon by both parties. Having the parent and teacher sign the document is very important. One copy should be provided to the parent while one copy is kept in the student academic file.

Moving beyond the basics of establishing student and parent relationships, and organizing our classrooms with the appropriate classroom management, we can move onto examining state standards for student learning. Now each state obviously has its own ideas and agenda regarding state standards for learning. I, however, have found that my students are capable and very interested in learning beyond the minimum requirements. Even though students' academic abilities vary, differentiating our instructional methods, not only for the general subjects, but for an advanced theme is possible.

Now, I'm sure you are wondering what "Advanced Concepts" are. This is a method of instruction that I have recently developed and implemented at my private school. This includes classroom teachers first embracing and teaching a foreign language and second, establishing various "Advanced Concepts" that guide students to begin developing career interests. For example, during the last school year my students' studied government as their Advanced Concept. I created a study board that included all of our local, state, and federal government leaders. Next to each person's photograph was their name, job title, and a snap shot of their place of work. This allowed my students to view the board daily, study the information, prove retention, and then came time to apply that knowledge. We began at the bottom with our study of local government. After learning about a nearby city's mayor and gaining an understanding of what is required with such a title, we actually reached out and requested a meeting. The mayor graciously accepted our request and invited my class to come to city hall, ask questions, and even had the opportunity to act as the town council and sit at the dais. My students absolutely loved the field trip, applied the knowledge they learned in class, and were able to cement true knowledge of what it means to be a mayor and how a town council operates as part of the legislative branch.

We couldn't stop there of course. We went on to request a meeting with the Governor of Virginia and were actually accepted! My students travelled to Richmond,

toured the Governor's Mansion, toured the Virginia State Capitol Building, witnessed the General Assembly in action, did a private Q & A with Governor Terry McAuliffe, and then met with Senator Scott Surovell afterwards. Yes, this did require quite a bit of organization for the timing to work out, but the fact is, it worked out! Once again, my students got to see firsthand exactly what they had learned in class, and were excited to do it. But now that we conquered the state level, we realized we couldn't stop there. Soon after requesting a tour of the White House, we received authorization and went on a tour of the White House and the U.S. Capitol Building. These events truly had an impact on my students and helped them realize that yes, they are important, and yes people are willing to recognize them and invite them to engage in real life learning.

After last year worked out so well, I held a conference with my class to determine what we would learn this current school year. They brought many wonderful ideas to the table that I hadn't even thought of. Our overall Advanced Concept became medicine. They wanted to study more than just medicine so we came up with a schedule for the year. To begin the year we studied cell biology. Then we moved to human anatomy by studying bones, muscles, internal organs, and the bodies systems. What we learned from last year was that we couldn't just stay in the classroom to get the full benefit. So I reached out to the University of Mary Washington and emailed several professors directly. As we completed each level of study, we met with a professor to do a hands-on lab. Now, please understand, my students did significant study time before embarking on their trips to UMW. They proved mastery of the subject matter and then were able to apply that knowledge when sitting in class with college students or while working in a private lab with a professor. Having the ability to act in a mature, professional manner was not something that occurred over night. Before we began our journey this year, my students and I came to understanding that there was a certain level of expectation required in order to attend such field trips (or as I like to call them, educational adventures). If you are a public school teacher, I'm sure you are thinking, "How does this apply to a class of 25 plus?" You would be surprised how any community professionals are so willing and eager to volunteer their time to support your classroom Advanced Concept goals.

To establish an Advanced Concept Program at your school, start by doing the following:

- 1) Choose a main career path you feel comfortable teaching.
- 2) Select a variety of sub-categories that are related to your main career path.
- 3) Research materials needed to promote retention of in class lessons.
- 4) Create a variety of hands-on activities that go along with what you are studying each week.

5) Prepare study guides that students and parents can review together and study at home.

6) Develop quizzes that test student retention along the way.

7) Once students have shown competency each time you complete a sub-category, invite a community professional to come and work with the students. If you are a private school and have access to a bus, request a field trip visit to their work location.

8) Make sure that each time you study a new sub-category you incorporate information from previous sub-categories to refresh and promote long term retention.

If you are truly driven to improve your instructional techniques and advance your curriculum, you will easily be able to establish this system in your classroom. This instructional method has proven to increase student interest, create a happy classroom with happy students, and excites students to return to school every day. Students will take pride in their accomplishments, “wow” you with their ability to learn and retain content (normally considered out of reach for them), and thrilled to show off their skills.

You may be thinking at this point, “But what about the basics? How can I start more advanced material when they have yet to grasp reading or math?” Though reading and math are definitely a top priority, they shouldn’t be the only thing students are exposed to. As noted a few paragraphs up, it is very important to understand what your students’ weaknesses are and then establish a plan on how to turn it into a strength. Students realize when they have a weakness. Continuously bringing it to their attention by giving them the same work to complete will not bring them to proficiency. Students deserve variety in their education. Should you ignore their weaknesses? Absolutely not! But should you punish them for having such weaknesses? Creating your daily schedule to incorporate additional time to work on weaknesses is very important. This doesn’t mean that you should ignore any possible strengths they have and could develop further. Through the inclusion of Advanced Concepts in your curriculum you allow students to harness their strengths, learn more about their strengths and channel how they would like to proceed in the future. Every student has or has had a weakness during their academic career. This should not impede the development of their adult career. Remember, our job as teachers is to create successful adults.

As I conclude this article, I would like to do a quick review of the most important things to begin incorporating in your classroom. First and foremost, if you haven’t read it yet, go out and buy a copy of “The First Days of School” by Harry Wong. This lays out the best methods of establishing classroom policies, procedures, rules and consequences. A classroom will never be a classroom without proper classroom management. Second,

remember that your class changes every year. With that change, make sure *you* make a change, too. Allow your class to help you develop your classroom management plan. They will thank you for it, and you will be a happier teacher. Next, get to know your students. Understand their strengths and weaknesses and make a plan where everyone wins. Then, connect with parents by providing them with your classroom management plan (policies, procedures, etc.) If you can't reach out to them daily, make sure you email at least once a week. Establishing a continuous flow of positive communication from the very beginning will be rewarding until the end. Lastly, develop an Advanced Concept for your classroom that you feel comfortable teaching. It's important that you feel confident teaching the material and that the students show interest learning it. Don't feel rushed to plan it all ahead, begin with a general plan and be willing to lengthen or shorten sub-categories as you move through the school year. Most importantly, make sure they are having fun while they are learning and allow them to drive sometimes. Partner with professionals in your community by sending an email or making a phone call. Don't be afraid to ask, the worst thing they can say is, "no". For more information about my Advanced Concept program, you can email me at acanter@meritschools.com.

Amie Canter "Advanced Concepts for the 21st Century"