SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR BELONGING AND DEEPER LEARNING:

Instructional Practices

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Supportive learning environments are built through the everyday experiences students have with their teachers, classmates, and learning. When students feel known, valued, supported, and challenged, they are more likely to participate, take academic risks, persist when learning becomes difficult, and see themselves as capable learners. Deeper learning strengthens these conditions when students have meaningful opportunities to think, contribute, collaborate, and experience success.

Instructional choices help make these conditions visible in classrooms. The following practices highlight ways educators can strengthen belonging, engagement, access, and deeper learning.



See What Students Already Know[1]

Students bring knowledge, experiences, strategies, and ways of thinking into every classroom. Sometimes that knowledge is easy to see; other times, it may be hidden inside an incomplete answer, an unexpected strategy, or a response that is not yet correct. Rather than beginning with what students are missing, educators can look closely for what students already understand and build from there.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE:

Before correcting an answer, ask, "Tell me how you were thinking about this." Listen for what the student understands and use that as the starting point for the next question.

Create Multiple Ways for Students to Engage[2]

Participation does not look the same for every student. Students can participate successfully in different ways and at different times throughout the learning experience. Some students may share their strongest thinking with a partner, in a small group, through writing, or after additional think time. The goal is not identical participation, but meaningful opportunities for every student to engage in the thinking and contribute to the learning. Multiple participation structures help make those opportunities available to more students.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE:

Use think time, partner talk, small groups, written responses, and whole-class discussions so students have more than one way to share what they know.

Move from Compliance to Thinking[3]

A quiet classroom where every student completes an assignment is not necessarily a classroom where every student is deeply learning. Deeper learning asks students to do more of the intellectual work to explain, justify, collaborate, question, revise, and reflect.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE:

During a lesson, ask yourself, "Am I doing work right now that my students could be doing?"

Make Learning Meaningful[4]

Students benefit from opportunities to see their experiences, identities, questions, and communities connected to what they learn. Meaningful curriculum goes beyond an isolated celebration, historical figure, or example. It invites students to examine ideas from multiple perspectives, ask questions, make decisions, and apply learning to issues that matter.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE:

Ask, "How does this learning connect to my students' lives, experiences, questions, or communities?"

For help with implementing these strategies, contact the Center for Access and Opportunity at The Southern Education Foundation at: scoa@southerneducation.org

Look for Barriers, Not Deficits[5]

When students struggle, supportive learning environments require educators to look beyond individual students and consider the learning conditions around them. Barriers may include limited opportunities to participate, tasks that do not build from students' knowledge and experiences, narrow expectations for showing understanding, or structures that limit access to rigorous learning.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE:

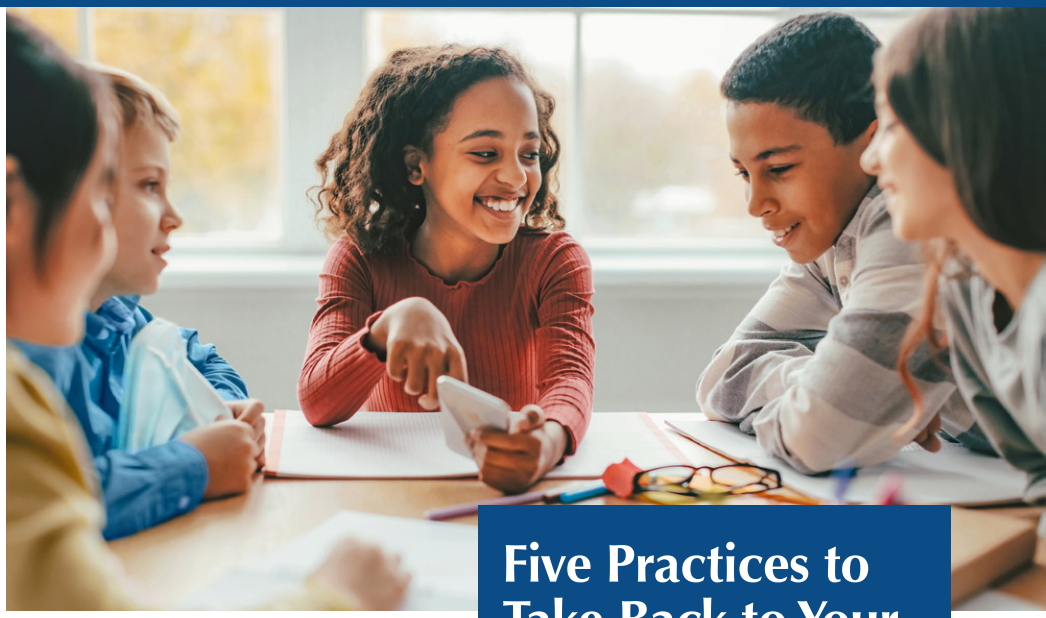
Ask, "What could we change about the learning experience to give this student a better opportunity to succeed?"

Protect Students' Opportunity to Learn[6]

How educators respond to behavior also shapes students' learning experiences. When students are removed from classrooms, they may also lose access to instruction, relationships, and opportunities to belong. Approaches centered on relationships, investment in students, meaningful conversations, and connections to the learning community can protect students' opportunities to learn.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE:

Consider whether responses to behavior keep students connected to instruction, relationships, and the learning community.



Create the Conditions for Teachers[7]

Teachers do not create supportive learning environments through individual effort alone. School leaders help create the conditions for strong instructional practice to grow. Protected collaborative planning, learning walks, analysis of student work, and shared expectations give educators opportunities to learn from one another and strengthen practice together.

LEADERSHIP FOCUS:

Start with students, build teacher capacity, create time and structures for collaboration, and use data to ask better questions.

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Five Practices to Take Back to Your Classroom

1. **Start with student thinking:** Ask how students arrived at an answer and build from what they already understand.
2. **Expand participation:** Provide multiple ways for every student to think, talk, write, collaborate, and contribute.
3. **Let students do the thinking:** Create opportunities for students to explain, justify, question, revise, and reflect.
4. **Connect learning to students:** Draw on students' identities, experiences, questions, and communities, and create opportunities to apply learning in meaningful ways.
5. **Look for barriers before assuming deficits:** Consider the task, expectations, opportunities to participate, and access to instruction. Ask what we can change to better support student learning and success.

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4 Make Learning Meaningful

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