



## Promote positive self-talk to boost student engagement

Engaging struggling learners is a perennial challenge, and the switch to distance learning due to the coronavirus outbreak has made it more difficult.

However, strategies exist for educators to boost participation, which is critical for students to access the general curriculum and to reach their academic goals. "The fear is that kids who struggle with learning will fall further behind and widen the achievement gap," said Lisa Navarra, founder of Child Behavior Consulting LLC and a former special education teacher and behavior specialist.

Navarra advises educators to use positive approaches to help students begin a task and stay on task. The first approach is to help students learn and practice positive **self-talk**, she said, because the inability to launch into an assignment can start with students thinking to themselves, "I can't," or "I'm overwhelmed."

Changing those negative thoughts into a positive framework allows a person the ability to self-regulate and manage their thoughts, feelings, and actions, Navarra said. For example, encourage students to practice replacing, "I can't" with "I can" or "I will," she said.

"Positive **self-talk** makes you feel empowered, like you have a choice," Navarra said. "Perception has a direct impact on the ability to think positively."

Next, have students pair those positive thoughts with actionable tasks. "Kids need visuals to see the action skills of what they need to be doing, when they need to be doing them so they can perform," Navarra said. For example, encourage students to repeat out loud and then to themselves, "I can and I will," then have the students state the action skills they will use to reach their goal.

Navarra advises using these additional strategies to also boost the engagement of struggling learners:

- **Connect with families.** Be empathic to a family's situation and let them know you are available as a resource. Offer suggestions for actionable strategies students can make, even if they are assigned at times that are manageable for the family and student.

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- **Encourage students to create a dedicated workspace.** Have students work with their parents to create a dedicated space at home for learning that can be an area devoid of distractions, if possible. Advise parents and students to put school supplies, such as paper, pencils, and a computer in the learning space, if one is available. If the student is using a computer, headphones can be handy to limit distracting noises.
- **Use visuals to support learning.** Struggling learners, including those with ADHD, often have a hard time organizing their work or transitioning from one assignment to another. In distance learning, the social cues these students rely on from peers and teachers are missing so they need the help of visual prompts. Notecards that students can place in their workspace that remind them to focus and ask themselves, "What should I be doing?" can promote sustained learning, Navara said.

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