

# Five Strategies to Stop Blaming Students and Start Impacting Learning

Being a teacher is not easy; it's exhausting, never ending, and at times overwhelming. Educators take on this task because of their love for teaching and making a positive impact on the future of their students. Unfortunately, we see at times the amount of mental energy that goes into blaming students for problems in schools. As a result, we see burned out teachers and administrators feeling helpless. It is mentally exhausting to focus on everything wrong with a student—and it's toxic for the classroom and school environment. There is a way to acknowledge behavior challenges and support teachers at the same time. Of course, this way is more difficult. Taking responsibility and ownership is what produces the tremendous impact on both a school's culture as well as the individual student. Here are five strategies to stop blaming students and start impacting learning.

1. *Take "parents should" out of your vocabulary when discussing students.* We know there are bad parents; some are selfish, absent, neglectful, or cruel. Others are just overwhelmed or failed themselves at school. Some parents behave like the bullies they, themselves, complain about. Some will belligerently take their child's side in any dispute. However, no matter where a student lands on a teacher's naughty or nice list, he/she is somebody's pride and joy. If we continue to blame students because of how they are parented, the challenges we are facing with the student at school will never become resolved. Instead, we will be blinded by excuses and continue the negative pattern of blaming and not intervening appropriately.
2. *Remind yourself why you got into teaching in the first place.* Knowing your WHY can keep your motivation level high on those mornings you're feeling burned out. When you know your WHY, you won't get frustrated when Johnny wants to be Johnny. The work of a teacher has a purpose. Teachers have the opportunity of shining the light of change and having a permanent impact that touches the lives of their students by contributing to making their future one that inspires and is productive. That in itself tells you how important your job is. If that's not enough, try reading a letter from a former student to give you a boost and rekindle that passion to get out of that slump. It will remind you that your influence reaches long after the student leaves your classroom; today's students deserve your passion and fire.
3. *For every negative comment you make about the student, force yourself to identify 5 positive comments.* Everyone most likely remembers one or two comments a teacher made about them in school as a child. While that teacher will never remember making that comment 30 years from now, it will stay with that student into adulthood because of the way it made them feel. Everyone slips up and says something negative once in awhile, but words can be destructive weapons that affect a student's self-concept. As a student's self-concept dives, the student may become unable or unwilling to maintain good behavior simply because he/she feels defeated. For every negative comment you make, force yourself to give five positive comments. Below are a few frames:

*You really hung in there by \_\_\_\_\_.  
That was really cool when you \_\_\_\_\_.  
Wow, you pushed yourself through \_\_\_\_\_ ; I'm very proud of you.  
I was so impressed today when you \_\_\_\_\_.  
It was awesome to see you \_\_\_\_\_.  
I hope you feel proud about \_\_\_\_\_, because you should.  
It's not easy to \_\_\_\_\_, but you are making it happen.*

Put this into action; once you become more fluent and mindful of the types of reinforcements you use, it will become easier to maintain a higher positive to negative ratio in your classroom.

4. *Understand your own triggers and include administration in a game plan when you notice you are losing your patience or cool.* Administrators should establish a culture in which teachers feel safe asking for support with a student they are repeatedly struggling with. Some students will need a collaborative response to help improve their behavior. While we understand minor issues should be handled by the teacher, there are times teachers wait to bring challenging students to an administrator's attention until after they have reached their breaking point. As a teacher you need to know your triggers and when it is time to ask for help instead of keeping it in, complaining to your grade level or department team about it for months, then finally exploding and wanting the student out of your classroom. Not asking for help as a preventive approach will hurt both the student and teacher in the long run.
5. *Give the student a clean slate every day.* Remember, challenging students are usually covering a lot of hurt or trauma and efforts to reach these students will be initially met with resistance and withdrawal. This is when the student desperately needs a patient, determined, and affectionate adult with thick skin who refuses to take offensive behavior personally. We realize some students will make themselves hard to like. Know your students; know their stories and the baggage they bring with them to school each day. When you know the reasons behind their misbehavior, it won't make you angry; it'll break your heart. Give students the opportunity to hit the reset button and start the next day treated the same as your best-behaved students.

Remove any variables that could be used as an excuse for a student not learning and direct that responsibility back to the single biggest impact on student achievement; the teacher. Now, if a student isn't successful, I, the educator, will look to other methods to reach that student, rather than pointing to other variables and exonerating myself of the responsibility. We only have 180 days to make a difference in a student's life each year, then it's the next teacher for another 180 days. If each year's teacher had the mindset of blaming the student or other variables rather than owning the responsibility, two consecutive years of this will likely put that student on an irreversible path. A path more likely to not read on grade level by third grade or repeatedly receive exclusionary discipline, making that student 18 times more likely to become incarcerated, part of the juvenile justice system, in gangs, a high school dropout, or on welfare. In adapting one of Henry Ford's famous quotes to emphasize how much attitude and beliefs play in success or failure, consider, "Whether you think they can or they can't—you're right." If you don't believe a student is capable of achieving or behaving at a certain level, what would possibly motivate you to support them? You've already written the student off as being incapable. However, if you believe that a student can and will, you will roll up your sleeves and unload every resource to support that student. In our next article, we will provide key connections between academics and behavior.