



Strategy 4. Cultivate a Nurturing Environment

4.4 Expect the Best from Every Student

Why is this important?

Have you ever heard of the “self-fulfilling prophecy”? That term was conceived by Robert Merton (1948) to describe a false conception of a situation that evokes a new behavior that makes or forces the originally false conception to come true.

Darley and Fazio (1980) examined self-fulfilling prophecy and its effects in the classroom. They revealed that students interpret their teacher's expectations and align their self-image with those expectations. If a teacher develops a set of beliefs about students, then those beliefs influence how the teacher interacts with the student, and the students come to expect similar treatment in the future, behaving in ways that mirror the teacher's expectations.

Success with students from poverty backgrounds depends not only upon the quality of the curriculum and instruction but also upon a teacher's understanding of his or her own values and beliefs. There can be a temptation for teachers to protect students from rigorous, grade-level expectations out of “concern” that the high expectation will frustrate or be insurmountable for a learner(s). This attitude propagates low expectations, which then contribute to gaps in opportunity and achievement. The greater the risk factors in a student's life, the more important high expectations are to the student's life chances (Rubie-Davies, 2006; Speybroeck et. al, 2012).

In addition, any student, low income or not, whose teacher sets low expectations may become resistant to higher expectations. It is critically important for every teacher to set and maintain high expectations for every student. Setting high expectations is only half of the equation. Believing they can all reach those expectations and exceed those expectations is critical. If you believe it, they will believe it as well.

What might it look like?

- » Reinforce daily that students are capable of success if they put forth the effort.
- » Communicate high expectations by encouraging students to give their “personal best” every day. When a student comes with completed work below expectations, provide feedback, but encourage them to try again.



- » Insist on quality work. When a student submits work that is less than their best, find out why. Identify and address the cause. If the reason is one you can eliminate, do so. For example, a child might need access to materials or more information to complete a project. If the reason for poor quality work is due to a lack of effort, insist that the student present their best work to you. Over time and with consistent reinforcement students will learn what is passable and meet your expectations.
- » Provide difficult but achievable tasks. Too easy tasks promote the notion that little effort is needed. Instead, students should come to class each day knowing they will stretch their minds. By consistently creating tasks that are difficult but achievable, you create a culture of hard work in your classroom. Find out what your student already knows and can do, then create lessons that are a step above that difficulty level.
- » Be selective and specific when praising. To pass on positivity and enthusiasm to students, it is easy to fall into the trap of complementing all things that kids do. Specific, spaced praise reinforces the effort and behavior you want to replicate.
- » Demonstrate the expectation with an exemplary example from previous students' work. This will help students to visualize what is expected of them.
- » Give timely, reflective, action oriented, and detailed feedback. Instead of cheerleading an essay with "way to go, awesome job" try, "you almost have me convinced with the persuasive tone and evidence you gave in paragraph 3. I think if you gave me a couple more examples, I would totally agree with your stance because examples are a useful way of showing how well you know and understand the point you're making."
- » Be consistent in maintaining high expectations for every student in everything you ask them to do. Getting a class culture in which hard work and focus are expected takes time.

Self-Check and Reflection

- » How do you model and communicate high expectations to your students?
- » What type of expectation culture do you have in your classroom? In your school?
- » Do you find there are some students who you expect more from and those that you expect less? Why do you think you hold these beliefs?
- » What are some things you can do immediately to communicate and support high expectations for all students?



Where can I find more resources?

Resources	Links	Description
What Does It Mean to Have High Expectations for Your Students	What Does It Mean To Have High Expectations For Your Students	Article and video on expectations and the Pygmalion effect
College Ready: Setting High Expectations for Student Success	College Ready: Setting High Expectations for Student Success - Bing video	Video on encouraging students to be their very best
Poverty and the Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations	Poverty and the Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations	Podcast from Dr. Anael Alston, a superintendent, talks about common misconceptions educators have about students in poverty
High Expectations: What to Look For	High Expectations: What to Look For - ASCD Inservice	Article and tips for setting high expectations
Growth Mindset	Carol Dweck Revisits the Growth Mindset	Article with tips for creating a growth versus fixed mindset and expectations for students.

References

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- Merton, R.K. (1948). The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. *The Antioch Review*, 8(2), 193–210.
- Rubie-Davies, C. M. (2006). Teacher Expectations and Student-Sept Perceptions: Exploring Relationships. *Psychology in Schools*, 43: 537-552.
- Speybroeck, S., Kuppens, S., van Damme, J., van Petegem, P., Lamote, C., Boonen, T., & de Bilde, J. (2012). The role of teachers’ expectations in the association between children’s SES and performance in Kindergarten: A moderated mediation analysis. *PLoS ONE*, 7, e34502. [doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0034502](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0034502).

