FLY FIVE®

The Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum

PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Developing Personal Accountability in Students

Educators and students have shown remarkable creativity, tenacity, and resourcefulness over the last year. As bedrooms became classrooms and teachers quickly adapted their lesson plans for an online format, student learning shape-shifted but never ceased. As we close out an entire year of pandemic education, there's an opportunity to leverage these changes to build an important set of skills crucial for student success: personal accountability. Whether students have been aware of it or not, they have had to become more accountable for their own learning over the last year. Families have been busier than ever, teachers are no longer in the same room, and study groups have been virtual. All of this change can make it easy to let their learning take a back seat to playing online games during class or letting the TV distract them from homework time. Now is an ideal moment to have students reflect on how they have shown accountability over the last year and make a plan for how they will strengthen their accountability in the future.

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Personal accountability is more than following rules or adhering to social norms, it involves developing a commitment to learning and personal growth (Reibel, 2017). Student accountability must be rooted in a culture of "inquiry and continuous improvement" where we foster collaboration and seek to build innovative schools that prepare students for success beyond their walls (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014, 4). Genuine student accountability must come with high expectations and aim to teach students relevant skills in classrooms that are responsive to students' needs. When we cultivate accountability in this way, students are developing the intrinsic motivation necessary to become responsible, self-sufficient learners (Darling-Hammond, 2014).

Promoting Personal Accountability in Students

In order to help students build accountability, they must have a stake in their learning. We can construct a classroom environment that is collaborative and dynamic, where students have an active role in shaping their education. In the collaborative classroom, learning is socially and self-constructed and both students and teachers play a powerful part in the learning process (Jafar, 2016). Students engaged in a collaborative course reported higher levels of engagement with the material and a stronger sense of its relevance in their lives. In one particular study of college students who collaborated with the professor on creating the course readings and assignments, students chose to hold class even on a day when the professor was unable to attend (Jafar, 2016). This suggests that students will hold themselves accountable when they feel that their learning is a part of them and they understand that they have something to gain from being an active participant.

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Holding students accountable cannot be relegated only to their academic responsibilities; accountability must reflect the full purpose of education (Seltz, 2015), which is to educate the whole child and support academic as well as social and emotional growth. We must be sure that students are accountable for their learning and their academic outcomes, but we must also ensure that students are accountable for their actions, behaviors, and decisions.

As we focus on building internal motivation in students to hold themselves accountable, we must also contextualize how accountability is developed in our classroom and school. What is the current culture of accountability in your school community? Many educators and school leaders adhere to deeply ingrained patterns of external accountability, and many schools are still beholden to test scores as a marker of success (Datnow et al., 2019). Reflecting upon whether your school focuses on accountability for outcomes versus process is a necessary step in understanding how to best instill a sense of personal accountability in students.

Strategies

Nurture student accountability with the following strategies:

- **Pose questions to guide student thinking**. What is their role in their learning? When working in a group, to what extent are they accountable for their group's success? Be sure that students understand their role in collaborative learning and help them bridge gaps and clarify their thinking (Jafar, 2016). Teachers can set clear expectations for young students so they know exactly what they need to do. As students become more comfortable with accountability, they should practice defining their own roles in a group and working together to achieve a goal. After a big project, exam, presentation, game, or performance, have students reflect on what went well and what could have gone better. How can they be accountable for themselves and their actions? What can they do to improve next time?

- **Utilize formative assessments**. A formative assessment, which is an informal, ungraded assignment used to assess a student's understanding of a concept (McGlynn & Kelly, 2017; Britton, 2011), can help students become more aware of the depth of their learning. A formative assessment can illuminate weaknesses in a student's understanding of a concept, and once they understand where they are lacking, they can decide for themselves how to go about acquiring the skills they need (Reibel, 2017). Formative assessments help build student accountability because students are able to see for themselves whether they have met their learning goal, whether they need a brief review, or whether they need to review the material again in a fundamentally new way (McGlynn & Kelly, 2017).

● **Provide structure and set clear expectations**. Even in instances of collaborative learning or virtual learning, where a structure may be loose, students can still create a structure to work within and practice sticking to it. In fact, online learning presents a unique opportunity for students to practice accountability early and often. Without an educator present at all times during virtual learning, students have ample opportunities to get distracted or procrastinate. Work with students to set a schedule that they will stick to, not because of fear of punishment, but because they want to succeed. Within that schedule, outline expectations that delineate clearly what skills and proficiencies you are looking for. This gives students the tools to self-assess and think critically about where they are on their learning journey and when they have successfully finished a task or accomplished a learning goal (Reibel, 2017).

● **Give students flexibility and chances to correct their mistakes**. Students, like adults, won't get everything the right first time. As students continue adjusting to changes in how they are learning, they may need more flexibility in completing their assignments or constructing their learning. Offer students this flexibility by allowing them a few choices for when their assignments are due. When a student has failed to grasp a concept or needs to revisit material, give them a chance to make corrections and reflect on what they can do differently in the future (Pincince, 2020). This allows students to think more deeply about how they learn and encourages them to be accountable for understanding the material, rather than just meeting deadlines or getting a certain grade.

● **Use logical consequences that have an immediate impact on the student**. Whether a student misses an assignment, misbehaves, or mistreats a classmate, they must understand why what they did was wrong. Rather than punishing them, implement logical consequences that respect a student's dignity while helping them develop an internal understanding of appropriate, responsible behavior (Responsive Classroom, 2011). As students begin to see why it's important to turn in assignments on time or why they must be respectful of their peers, for example, they build their capacity to internally motivate themselves to make good decisions and be accountable for themselves.

● **Leverage technology to customize and personalize a student's experience**. Students can benefit from online learning in the form of academic choice and increased flexibility. When possible, give students choices about how to acquire knowledge: solo online research, collaborating with others via message board or breakout rooms, or creating something in their home that they present on their screen. As students explore the material in a way that interests them, they are likely to learn more quickly and efficiently (Tyner & Petrilli, 2018) while also exploring different ways to use technology for learning.

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Teaching students to be accountable takes time and consistent, intentional effort. It is a somewhat nebulous aspect of social and emotional learning, as the distinction between external and internal motivation is thin. Yet teaching students to be internally motivated to hold themselves accountable can be profoundly beneficial.

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As we begin to implement policies and practices to hold students accountable for their learning and their behaviors, we may face periods of progress followed by regression, and that's normal. What's important is that we remember, even when it is difficult, it is our responsibility to teach students accountability and, during the pandemic, we are uniquely poised to cultivate this trait. Students can use their at-home learning time to learn to set their own schedules and learning goals, which they can follow through on long after "normalcy" has returned.

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