

By Melinda Swafford, Sue Bailey and Kayleigh Beasley

Why is it that some teachers are more effective with students than others? What skills do these teachers possess? One such skill is the ability to positively impact the learning environment. On a national level, teachers are being held accountable for student achievement, indicating the need to look at all possible avenues to improving it.^{1,2}

Effective teachers who create positive learning environments develop not only a classroom setting, but also an emotional setting that enhances student performance, making the learning environment a key focus in educating students.³ How do we describe a positive learning environment? It is a classroom that is student-oriented—one with high expectations, but recognizes that each student has unique needs, strengths and skill levels. In her

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POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS ENHANCE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

book *Guidance of Young Children*, Marian C. Marion states that learning occurs best in student-centered environments that have active engagement with content, peers and the teacher.⁴

At present, states are recognizing the importance of the learning environment on student achievement. In Tennessee, the learning environment is one of three components in the current teacher evaluation model, called TEAM (Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model),⁵ which was adopted by the state for participation in First to the Top.

Components of the Learning Environment

Creating a positive learning environment is not new to career and technical educa-

tors. In 2002, June Youatt and Elizabeth Hitch identified six functions that Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) teachers should consider when planning a positive learning environment. These include: security, shelter, social contact, symbolic identification, task instrumentality and pleasure.⁶

However, new *and* seasoned teachers may find incorporating these six functions to be a challenging task because the typical FACS classroom may include students with various learning styles, as well as contain several grade levels. Furthermore, the program of study in the FACS curriculum includes a variety of courses, each with numerous standards. Organizing instructional materials to teach the standards can be a daunting

task. How do FACS teachers meet the six functions of providing a positive learning environment while staying organized and meeting the guidelines of the methods of teacher evaluation?

The following sections show how Youatt and Hitch's six functions correlate with the TEAM teacher evaluation model. This correlation can be transferred to other state teacher evaluation models.

Security and Shelter

Safety is a high priority for every school system and teacher today, and students must feel safe in order for learning to occur. "Safety includes not only physical safety, but [also] emotional safety for the student *e.g.*, freedom of expression, assurance of confidentiality and establishment

Teaching in a POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

description A classroom that is student-oriented—one with high expectations, but recognizes that each student has unique needs, strengths and skill levels.

6 components



student success

Through a positive learning environment, students will gain the skills they need for success in careers, advanced education and life.



of an atmosphere of respect.”⁷

The most elaborate lesson plans cannot compensate for a chaotic classroom; therefore, teachers must develop classroom management techniques that keep students engaged in the lesson. Well-managed classrooms have predictable environments (structure and routines), yet are relaxed and pleasant.⁸ In well-managed environments, students work efficiently, experience less stress and feel secure. By establishing expectations and classroom routines, and modeling appropriate behavior, teachers help students

develop a sense of control, as well as socially acceptable behavior. Students find comfort in and grow accustomed to routines that lead to the formation of habits that become generalized into everyday life.

An exemplary classroom is welcoming to all students. It is one where they can experience success. Is it possible for students to experience success in a classroom that is not welcoming? No! Therefore, it is necessary that we make the learning environment secure and safe for all students. This means an atmo-

sphere free from bullying and ridicule and accepting of diversity. As teachers, our attitudes provide the foundation of the classroom climate. Teachers establish expectations for learning and behavior, which provides a sense of security.

Social Contact

According to teacher and author Jackie Magnuson, in order to promote social contact within a classroom, it is necessary to establish a sense of community.⁹ This involves sharing expectations on course content, social behavior and student achievement. For your students to develop social skills, plan activities—such as group work and labs—that involve interpersonal skills and that focus on teamwork, respect and leadership. When we allow students to make choices, we respect their autonomy and show that we trust their judgment and values. These actions support the development of freedom of expression, self-esteem and confidence. The TEAM teacher evaluation model supports a learning environment in which interactions are caring and respectful. Student interest and opinions are valued, as is cooperation.¹⁰ This can be accomplished by teachers taking on the role of facilitator and by providing options and choices for students, which enhances students’ social development.

Symbolic Identification and Pleasure

Building a classroom community where students feel a sense of ownership is part of symbolic identification. A pleasant, well-organized classroom with stimulating lessons signifies care and control. When students know you care, they care. Motivational posters, personalized bulletin boards, music, various textures and labs—such as baking bread—enhance the senses and provide an environment that is conducive to learning. An exemplary classroom is welcoming to all students, has organized supplies and equipment that is readily accessible, and decor that

changes frequently.¹¹ An assignment relevant to students' personal needs leads to symbolic identification, allowing them to gain meaning in how FACS concepts improve the lives of individuals and families.

Task Instrumentality

Room arrangement should reflect specific courses and accommodate the task for the course. Tables for labs or group work and the use of desks for independent work make the classroom efficient for all types of activities.

Additionally, you should establish procedures for distributing and collecting assignments. Being organized when storing and distributing materials positively affects student achievement and behavior, while saving time and decreasing stress. Pay particular attention to lighting, noise, visual stimulation and arrangement of students. Physical boundaries and attractive decor are beneficial in the daily operation of the classroom. Tight, cramped spaces and ill-placed items increase stress. Organization allows students to focus on the task at hand and achieve higher grades.

Furthermore, research by Marion indicates that our actions as educators provide students with strategies to developing personal management skills.¹² Teachers must model actions that students are to emulate. Cues and reminders, such as pictures, labels and signs, help with organization of items and serve to make clean-up after labs and other cooperative activities more efficient.

Application

During a recent visit to a high school FACS classroom, I was able to observe a classroom activity that incorporated symbolic identification, security and pleasure. The CTE class was Life Connections, and the course standard was goals. Each student had to construct a kite to represent his or her personal goals for the future. The tails of the kites (five each) illustrated the steps needed to

reach the goal. The kites were displayed in the classroom, thus signifying the importance of each student's goals for the future, giving them a sense of pride. Constructing a kite with tails was an effective way to make the topic of goals more concrete and appealing to ninth grade students.

On another classroom visit, I observed a FACS teacher using several strategies as a way to support symbolic identification, task instrumentality and enhance social skills. The students in her classroom were in charge of various routines. They distributed worksheets, laptops and iPads, as well as controlled classroom lighting and collected papers. From this, students learned that teamwork is necessary, and they had pride in their contributions to the learning environment. Furthermore, the teacher's effective organization (labels, routines, baskets, etc.) enhanced the students' ability to take initiative and follow through with tasks and assignments, while also providing them with important life skills.

In both these examples, students were actively engaged in learning. They developed a sense of community by keeping the classroom organized, and they gained more self-esteem in the daily operation and decor of the classroom, all while developing skills needed for postsecondary education and jobs.

Student Success

As CTE educators, we want our students to be successful. It is in our best interest to focus on the learning environment as a means to enhance student achievement. Putting these strategies into practice allows you to develop a learning environment that is effective, positive and productive. By providing a positive learning environment, student achievement soars and behavior improves. Furthermore, when students generalize these practices, they learn to balance the demands of life. Through a positive learning environment, students will gain the skills they

need for success in careers, advanced education and life.¹³ ■

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