



# SUSTAINING OUTSTANDING SCHOOLS: SOS

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More on Marzano's strategies—

## Reinforcing effort and providing recognition

During the past year this column has been devoted to highlighting a number of the instructional strategies identified by Robert Marzano and his research group as providing the highest yield in student achievement.

This year, SOS will continue to focus on additional strategies that are featured in *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*.

The featured strategy for this column is *Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition*—with the emphasis on reinforcing effort. As Marzano et al. (2001) suggests, this strategy, when used consistently and effectively, can account for significant achievement gains for students by addressing students' attitudes and beliefs about what they can do to improve performance.

### Importance of reinforcing student effort

Marzano (p. 50) points out two generalizations that can be drawn from the research:

- Not all students realize the importance of believing in effort.
- Students can learn to change their beliefs to an emphasis on effort.

A common concern shared by many teachers, regardless of setting, is the passive nature of students—students doing the minimum on an assignment or not turning in their best work. Teachers frequently complain that when a new assignment is given, inevitably the first question that students ask is “How much is this worth.”

Too often students make little or no connection between effort and

achievement. For some students, an assignment is turned in and a grade “magically” appears. Success may be attributed to luck or ability. For others, school seems to be a game. The goal is to find out what target is acceptable (“what the teacher wants”), and to put forth just enough effort to achieve this benchmark.

When students receive feedback only in the form of grades, they see grades as the “end point,” often divorcing grades from the role of effort. This helps to reinforce the “grade orientation” for which many teachers have complained. Students who do not see the relationship between effort and achievement tend to remain passive recipients of their environment.

### Students who do not see the relationship between effort and achievement tend to remain passive recipients of their environment.

Some confusion can arise between praising or reinforcing ability as opposed to effort. As Mueller and Dweck's study (1998) indicated, the practice of praising ability is “perceived to have beneficial effects on motivation” when, in fact, they found more negative consequences on motivation when students were praised for their intelligence as opposed to effort.

In their study, children who were praised for their ability saw it as a static trait, one that is not subject to change. Therefore, they saw that they had little control over their ability to improve their performance. Additionally, they reported lower levels of task persistence when they were in frustrating situations. However, chil-

dren praised for their effort reported that they saw the trait of effort as “malleable” and therefore subject for improvement. Consequently, they felt more in control of their effort and were able to sustain persistence in challenging situations.

### Steps for explicitly teaching and exemplifying effort

If school staff are concerned with this issue, the question becomes: How do we explicitly convey the value of effort and reinforce “effort skills” in our students?

First, define “effort.” What does performance-improving effort look like in this school and/or in this subject? What specifically does someone do who is putting forth the kind of effort that will most likely “pay off” in improved success on the learning task at hand? It would be helpful to move from a generic and ambiguous definition of “effort” to a universally agreed upon definition of effort. As a staff, when you say we want to improve “effort,” what does it look like? What are the behavioral indicators of “showing effort”? What does this term mean in your setting? Build a rubric for effort. (Sample effort rubrics for primary, junior high and secondary students are available at the CCSE Web site [www.luc.edu/ccse](http://www.luc.edu/ccse)).

Next, identify exemplary models of effort. Examine the lives of eminent individuals or students' personal heroes to identify how effort played an important part in their success. This can help students develop concrete and meaningful experiences to reinforce the value and nature of effective effort. Additionally, the biographies of these individuals can provide a target for students for which to

aim their efforts. For some students, exemplars of this nature may not be readily available. It is critical that students can see that exerting effort can positively impact one's life.

Finally, give explicit feedback on effort. How do we give specific and directed feedback to our students regarding their demonstration of "effort"? These systems could include the development of specific rubrics that provide descriptors of what "effort" looks like. Can we provide situations or use specific assignments in which we give directed feedback on "effort"? Are there ways that we can encourage students to self-assess their level of effort on any given assignment, using the rubric? Can we help students develop graphic representations of the correlation of effort with achievement?

### Pitfalls to avoid

Be very aware of how effort is recognized. As indicated previously, it can be easy to praise ability as opposed to effort. Instead of praising a student only for the right answer (perceived often as ability by students: "she's smart"), it is critical to provide positive reinforcement for sustaining persistence in the problem-solving process in order to help to sustain future persistence to tackle even more challenging problems in the future.

Before we specifically reinforce effort, we need to know what it is and how we observe it. It is easy to say we need to work on increasing the level of effort in our students but not identify the target behavior. When a student is struggling, giving the admonition "study harder" is more likely to frustrate than motivate.

Give honest feedback when reinforcing effort. It is too easy to say "Good job" when maybe the "job" wasn't that good! Imagine the possible scenario: A coach has been working with the centerfielder to run hard to catch all fly balls and the fielder lets several fly balls fall because he didn't exert the effort to catch everything

near him. Coming off the field, a well-meaning parent yells "Good effort." This only serves to reinforce minimal effort.

Or this possible scenario: A young pianist makes numerous mistakes during a big recital and the music teacher, full of good intentions, reassures that student with a well-meaning "Good job." Although meant to be supportive, the teacher is not providing honest feedback and the student most likely knows it. The feedback is, at best, non-specific and, at worst, can help to reinforce a behavior that is not desired.

For students to continue to value (and practice) effort, effort must "pay off." They must be able to make explicit and accurate connections between things they did and the resulting improved performance. Praise or recognition, then, should be about the performance itself in relation to a standard or to their own previous performance.

In helping to build systems to distinguish between ability and effort, it seems that it would be critical to help parents understand the difference between the two as well. Providing information via newsletters or parent education evenings can help parents work to the same end as the school staff.

### Implementing together

Here are several suggestions for schools to implement this strategy.

Read and discuss the *SOS* article and support materials at a faculty meeting or team meetings. (Watch the Web cast together to spark discussion.)

Brainstorm concrete behaviors that describe effective effort. Use them to develop a rubric and test it out with a variety of learning performances. If students do what the rubric describes, are they likely to improve their performance? Perhaps more than a rubric is needed to accurately and concretely describe effective effort for different tasks.

Share stories that show the impact of effort on learning. Post them on the Web for easy access by teachers and students. Collect stories of your own students.

Develop a graphic way of reinforcing effort that students can see and use to connect effort with improved learning.

In learning teams, go deeper. Examine the steps and the pitfalls. Agree on and clearly identify one concrete thing you will all do to help students experience the value and efficacy of effort to improve performance over the next two weeks. Agree to log your actions and set a schedule for observing each other at least once. Invite the principal and/or department chair to observe as well.

Share observations about using the strategy and its impact on learning. Refine and agree on actions for the next two weeks.

Share actions taken and observations of impact at the next faculty meeting. ❖



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