

How to Handle Sleepy, Unprepared, and Unmotivated Students

They enter your classroom bleary eyed.

Some have bed-head and pillow lines etched on their faces. A couple are still finishing up breakfast. One boy appears to be wearing the same pajama top he wore to bed the night before.

For more than a few, learning is far from their mind.

The truth is, regardless of how strongly you harp on coming to school prepared, you can't always count on students to arrive with the mental and physical sharpness needed for optimal learning.

And you can't afford to leave it to chance. You can't afford to dive into a lesson when they're still rubbing sleep from their eyes. No, you have to take matters into your own hands and take a proactive approach—every day of the week.

Here's how:

Meet them outside.

The key to this strategy is not giving your students the opportunity to sleepwalk into your classroom. Always meet them outside first, either on the playground or in a hallway, preferably several minutes before the bell rings to allow time to visit and build rapport.

Note: If it's school procedure that your students meet in your classroom, then line them up outside your door just before starting time.

Set a simple expectation, or two.

After the bell rings but before leading your students into the classroom, set the tone for a day of inspired learning by asking for a straight line with backpacks zipped and slung over both shoulders. This sends the message that school is indeed in session and attentiveness and engaged participation starts now.

Get them moving into a routine.

Make sure your students have immediate and multiple responsibilities upon entering your classroom—prepping homework, hanging backpacks, organizing materials, checking mailboxes—all of which must be previously and thoroughly taught, modeled, and practiced as part of an every-morning routine.

Awaken their mental muscles.

Students become sluggish and unmotivated when they don't have responsibility. A fast-moving morning routine provides that initial burst of purpose they need to carry them into the first lesson of the day. It wakes them up, sharpens their acuity, and prepares their mental muscles for concentration and challenge.

Finish with pride.

I recommend finishing the routine with a straightening and neatening of their desks, tables, and work areas. A sense of pride in their classroom and in each other encourages an attitude of thankfulness and polite behavior. When completed, have your students wait for your first announcement while standing behind their chairs.

Get the blood flowing.

In most circumstances, your class will now be ready for learning. However, if your teacherly powers tell you that they need more zip and vigor, then a fast set or two of jumping jacks or body twists should do the trick. The relationship between exercise and mental performance is a close one; it pays to use it to your advantage.

Flipping a Switch

By starting the day task focused and brisk moving, you're grooving an association of attentiveness, independence, and responsibility with the ringing of the morning bell.

It flips a switch that jolts their bodies and minds awake and alive and ready for learning; for the spirit of the day must be one of purpose and energy—never boredom or drudgery.

And this responsibility falls to you.

Although you can have influence that extends beyond the walls of your classroom, you can't control what happens once your students leave for the day. You can't control how late they stay up, how early they rise, or whether or not they have breakfast.

But you *can* control how they enter your classroom. You can control their focus and urgency and transition from home-thinking to school-thinking.

So instead of your first lesson being met with yawns and indifference, your students will sit bright-eyed, alert, and attuned to the swift drumbeat of a well-run, productive classroom.

