

## How to Keep Your Students Focused the Last Hour of the School Day

So much good, quality instruction is lost in the hour before dismissal.

Energy supplies run low. Minds begin to wander. Misbehavior tempts. Despite your enthusiasm, rallying your students and pressing for new learning is a high-altitude climb compared to the sea cruise it was just hours before.

Indeed, for the better part of the teaching force, the final period is approached with cautious dread. *Who's going to disrupt the class this time? How often will I have to stop and wait? How many times will I need to remind and lecture and repeat myself?*

No matter how calm you begin the afternoon, no matter how energetic or determined, it rarely seems to go as well as you'd like. It rarely seems to match the clarity of thought and focus of the new morning. The truth is, the last hour of the day takes more out of you than the preceding hours put together.

But it doesn't have to be this way. For there are a few simple steps you can take to ensure that the end of the day finishes as sharp and bright-eyed as it began.

Here's how:

### Take a break.

A short break an hour or so before the end of the day is a welcome and refreshing balm for school-weary students. It shakes out restlessness, clears away cobwebs, and refocuses distracted minds for the final leg. It's a simple way to solve a big problem.

What your break looks like, however, depends on what preceded it.

If your students have been sitting, particularly if they've been concentrating or engaged in independent work, then you *must* get them up and moving. Lead them in light exercise, stretching, or standing

strength (yogā) poses. Anything that increases heart and respiratory rates will do.

Your class may also need to get some socializing out of their system. Give them a minute or so to walk over and say hello to a friend or make plans for after school. You're clearing the boards, so to speak, eliminating a major reason students lose attention during the final hour.

If, however, your students are wound up and full of excitable energy, perhaps they've just returned from recess or P.E., then a different sort of break is in order—one meant to calm, refocus, and restore.

In this case, ask your students to stand silently behind their desks, feet wide and hands behind their backs. Pause a moment and let their breathing regulate naturally. Then lead them in a series of long, slow breaths—in through the nose, out through the mouth, as the diaphragm extends and retracts.

Go ahead and reach above your head and stretch during the inhalation phase if you wish, bringing your hands down and in front on the exhale. Five to ten repetitions followed by another pause should do the trick in calming and rejuvenating restless minds and overactive limbs.

### **Lean heavily on routines.**

It's critically important that you finish the school day—that is, the last several minutes—without chaos, confusion, or misbehavior, that your last connection with your students matches the purpose-driven start of the morning.

This day-after-day expectation will help you avoid a mountain of headaches at dismissal. But that's not all. Surprisingly, it will also help keep your students engaged and focused from the early afternoon through to the end.

Well-performed routines, you see, act as bookends to periods of learning, ensuring that the goals, ambitions, and responsibilities of your classroom are never far from mind. In other words, there is always another expectation around the bend, another active responsibility to stay sharp and ready for.

To that end, be sure and teach, model, and practice precisely what you expect during the last ten minutes of the school day. Your students need to be purposeful and busy and held to a standard of excellence all the way up until the moment they leave your room.

Done right, there should be limited talking and virtually zero guidance on your part. Your role should be primarily that of an observer, carefully verifying that the high-bar standards you set for them are met.

### **Finish in silence.**

Have your end-of-day routine finish with every student standing behind their desk, silent, reflective, backpack looped over shoulders. Wait until all are looking at you. Then, while referring to the clock on the wall, ask for 30 seconds of silence.

This safeguards a peaceful, pleasant ending to your school day and eliminates the yelling, pushing, and running misbehavior so common after dismissal. It also gives you a chance to provide a final thought, note of humor, or word of encouragement to send along with them.

Make eye contact with each student, one at a time, as a silent invitation to line up. After repositioning yourself to the front of the line, release them out into the world with an easy smile, to their families, their homes, and their neighborhood lives.

### **The Space Between**

The teachers who produce the greatest progress in their students year after year aren't necessarily the most dynamic. They aren't always funny or interesting or outwardly inspiring. They don't all know how to play guitar and sing or draw like Bill Watterson.

And their lessons aren't always earth shattering.

But what they do better than most is keep their students on task. They keep them focused and motivated and encouraged to take academic chances. They get the most out of each moment—from morning bell to dismissal.

They've developed the classroom management skills to keep distractions, interruptions, and time-consuming misbehaviors to a scanty, bare minimum.

They focus their attention not so much on the moments outside of the school day—the meetings, discussions, trainings, busy work, and other necessary teacherly duties—but on the space between, the moments they're alone with their students.

