What Can Teachers Do to Engage Anxious Students? - ASCD

16-20 minutes

Juan asks to go the bathroom for the third time during math. Sue Lee gets easily frustrated and weepy when the teacher redirects her to a writing assignment. Sam has their head down and appears to be sleeping again during science. What do they have in common? *Disengagement:* one of the most common challenges educators face. When a student fails to participate, initiate a school task, or complete a task, it can halt a lesson, consume educators' time, and further demoralize both the educator and student. Students who are chronically disengaged are at risk for academic failure, behavior issues, social isolation, and other poor outcomes.

Many of these students struggle with the executive functioning skills required for task initiation, attention, planning, and organizing. However, addressing these skills with well-known executive functioning strategies alone can fall flat unless another aspect of disengagement is addressed: student anxiety. Anxiety has *doubled* in children and adolescents during the pandemic (Racine et al., 2021) and can cause weaknesses in these crucial areas of executive functioning, as well as in accurate thinking and independence. Left unaddressed, this volatile mix can play a major role in increasing disengagement.

The path to engagement, therefore, requires a focus on (1) anxiety-reduction, and (2) a combination of explicitly taught accurate thinking and executive functioning skills.
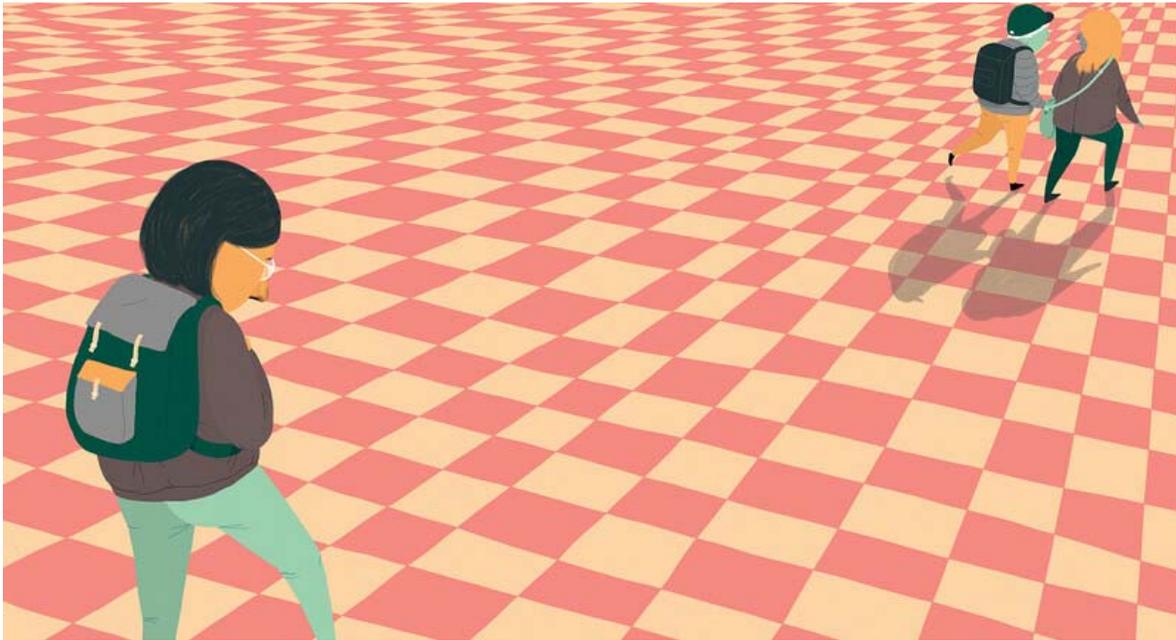
How Does Anxiety Affect Engagement?

When a student's anxiety increases, several other skills are negatively affected, including working memory (the ability to hold information and retrieve it as needed); self-regulation (the ability to adapt, emotionally and behaviorally, to the current situation); executive functioning skills (the ability to visualize future goals and complete the steps to achieve them); and accurate thinking (McEvoy et al., 2019; Moran, 2016).

There are several types of *inaccurate* thinking that are commonly associated with anxiety: "thinking on the downside" (assuming the worst will happen, which further escalates anxiety); all-or-nothing thinking (*I am terrible at math!* rather than *I am just struggling with long division*); and catastrophic thinking (*If I fail this quiz, I'll need to repeat 8th grade*). When these overwhelming thoughts flood an anxious student, executive functioning strategies alone (such as graphic organizers or rubrics) won't be enough to help them initiate an activity. These pervasive negative thoughts can also lead to problematic behaviors such as avoidance, disengagement, arguing, and shutting down.

Many students suffering from anxiety can get caught in a debilitating cognitive cycle: Poor executive functioning can cause a student to be anxious in school, and anxiety can cause poor executive functioning and inaccurate thinking, which in turn causes disengagement. By incorporating strategies to reduce inaccurate thinking and increase executive functioning skills, we can help students become more engaged.

But where exactly do we begin? With the simple process of *starting* and *ending* a task.

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Where Engagement Starts (or Stops)

By asking anxious students to start an activity or persist on a task, we may be asking them to do something they don't have the skills to execute. Engagement requires support at each stage of readiness. Here we will break down the components of a transition to illustrate the different skills required to stop, shift, or initiate a task and prescribe strategies that can help students gain the necessary skills to engage in work independently. Here's the flow:

Setting up for engagement ⟶ Stopping the first activity ⟶ Making a cognitive and physical shift ⟶ Initiating and engaging in the activity

Setting Up for Successful Engagement

Students sometimes balk when asked to start an assignment, but there's a common factor in this resistance that we can actively address. The most difficult transition we can ask of students is from a preferred activity to a non-preferred activity (e.g., "Recess is over. It's time to take your math quiz!") and this process can almost guarantee a problematic response (Minahan, 2014). It's difficult for the student to stop a preferred activity, let alone initiate a dreaded one. It's like jumping into cold water, and it's a set-up for resistance.

Instead, when we know a transition will be a challenge, we can ease students in gradually by adding an intermediate step: "Come in from recess and you can draw." Once the student is drawing at their desk, they are engaging in most of the variables you need for them to do math: sitting in a chair, holding a pencil, and touching a piece of paper. Now, you are only asking them to shift to a different piece of paper. That behavioral momentum can allow them to transition smoothly.

First: Stopping the Initial Activity

The typical transition warning in classrooms is the five-minute countdown: "Five more minutes and then we need to stop reading and put our books away!" We assume that it's an adequate prompt, but we also know that, inevitably, several students will not actually stop reading in five minutes. Judging time, pacing, and making a plausible plan to be accomplished in five minutes is quite difficult, and the simple countdown prompt doesn't support the development of these skills.
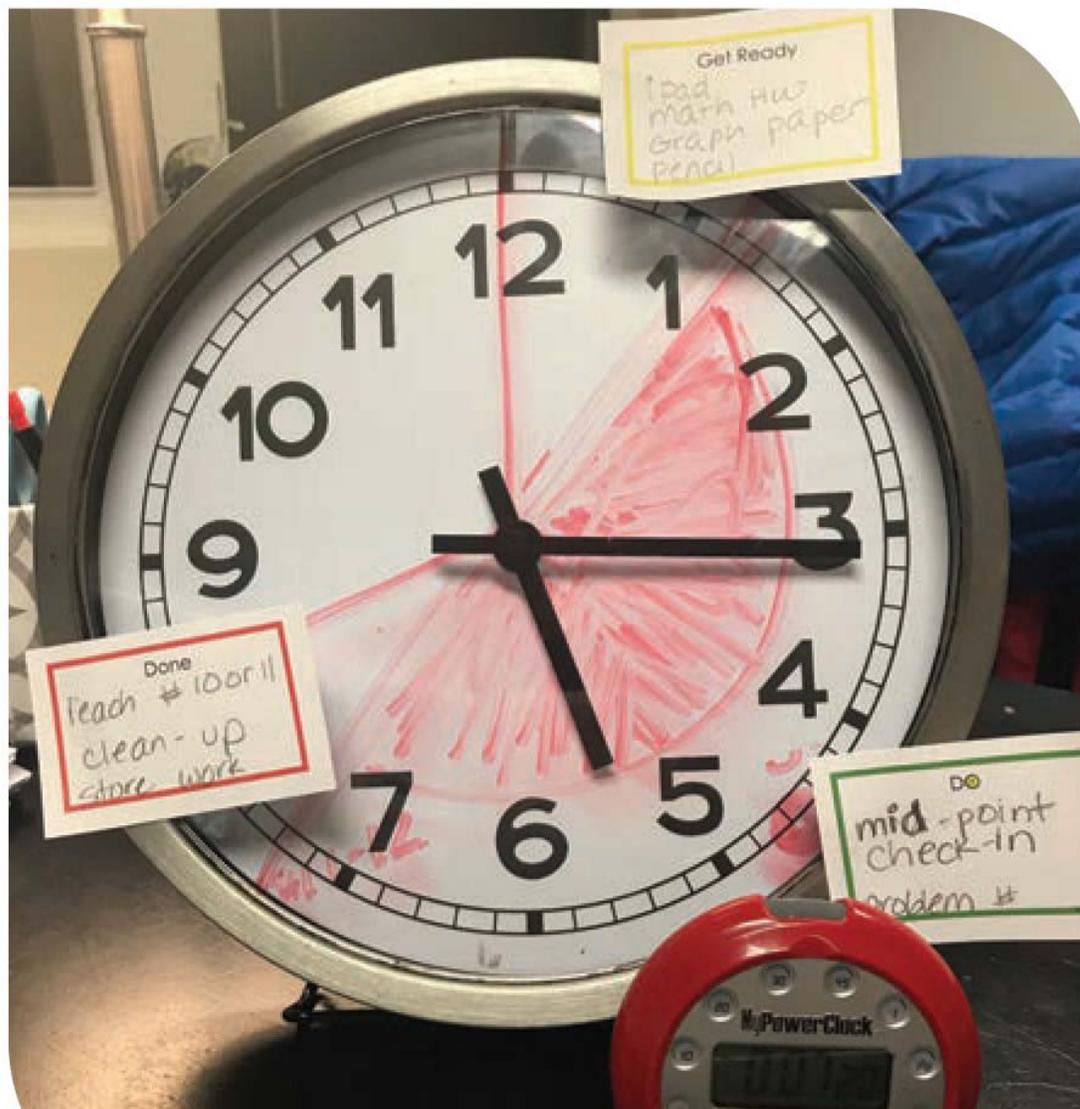
In order to stop, students need a plan (Minahan, 2014). Students may need explicit instruction about how to find a stopping place and pick an activity that is a good match for the time allotted. Check-ins ("What's your five-

minute plan?") can illuminate a student's *inaccurate* plan ("I will finish the book") and help the student recalibrate: "Actually, in five minutes you can only get to the end of this chapter. That is a good stopping plan." We can also give directions that include an action plan: "Five more minutes, which means finish the math problem you are on—don't start another one." This level of specificity increases the likelihood of a smooth transition and improves the student's ability to make an effective five-minute plan in the future.

Another strategy for ending an activity is to use the word *pause* instead of *stop* (Minahan, 2014). The word *stop* itself is an all-or-nothing term that can elicit all-or-nothing thoughts: the student can hear "stop" as "this needs to be completed and perfect," making it hard for them to stop when this isn't the case. However, they can typically *pause* without distress or misunderstanding.

We can also make time visible. Visual strategies, such as drawing the beginning and end times on an analog clock with a dry erase marker, can help students visualize time goals. As opposed to a countdown timer, which can spike anxiety, seeing the available volume of time on an analog clock facilitates metacognitive thinking about how to use the time available (Ward & Jacobsen, 2014a). You can also place sticky notes on the clock with goals for each chunk of time (see Figure 1). Students can use these time markers to track their progress, self-monitor, and know when they need help.

FIGURE 1. Making Time Visible

Second: Cognitively and Physically Shifting to the Next Activity

Before transitioning physically to the next activity, students must make a mental shift: They have to stop thinking about science, for example, and start thinking about math. They then must visualize the items needed (*For math I need a calculator, my math journal, and a pencil on my desk*) and physically gather those materials. Teachers often verbally walk students through this process, which helps the students get ready for class but doesn't build the skills they need to do it independently.

Instead, try a visual approach: Take an aerial photograph of a student's desk labeled "ready for math journals" that displays, from first person view, where the pencil, calculator, and math notebook are placed (clip art and visual picture schedules are poor substitutes for photographs). Project this to the class when you give the direction, "get ready for math journals." Students can simply arrange their desk to match the photograph, taking out their materials without adult support. Over time, with repetition of the same photograph and prompt pairing, the routine will become encoded into students' long-term memory storage (Ward & Jacobsen, 2014a; Minahan, 2014).

Third: Initiating and Engaging in the Next Activity

Anxiety and executive functioning challenges significantly affect the ability to initiate an activity. In this third step on the path to engagement, we need to provide accommodations and teach the necessary skills to reduce inaccurate negative thinking associated with anxiety and increase the mental imaging skill of task execution. As always, we should start with supportive accommodations.

When a child learns to ride a bike, we provide training wheels until they can ride independently. Similarly, we should provide accommodations to support students to initiate while explicitly teaching new skills. To encourage independent initiation, educators will need to begin by providing accommodations to compensate for the student's inability to initiate, while explicitly teaching strategies to allow them to become independent. If we remove the accommodations before the child has built the skills they need, they'll crash.

Accommodations for initiation need to address both executive functioning skill deficits and inaccurate or negative thinking associated with disengagement. One accommodation that supports executive functioning skills in students is the *Get Ready*Do*Done* strategy (see Figure 2).

We like to tell students, "Plan your work then work the plan!" But to explicitly teach the executive functioning process of "planning backward to move forward" for completing tasks and assignments, this multisensory method does the trick (Ward & Jacobsen, 2014b). Students start by asking the following questions when looking at the *Get Ready*Do*Done* planning template:

1. What will it look like when I am "done"?

2. What steps do I need to take or "do" to match my done image?

3. What materials and/or strategies will I need to "get ready"? Are there any obstacles or time robbers I can anticipate? What's my plan to prevent those obstacles?

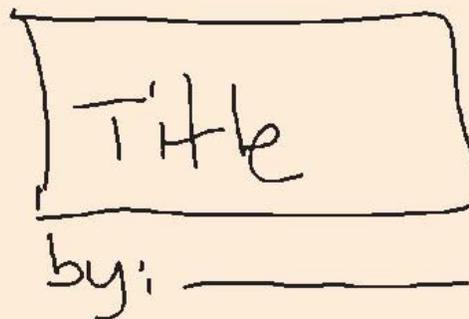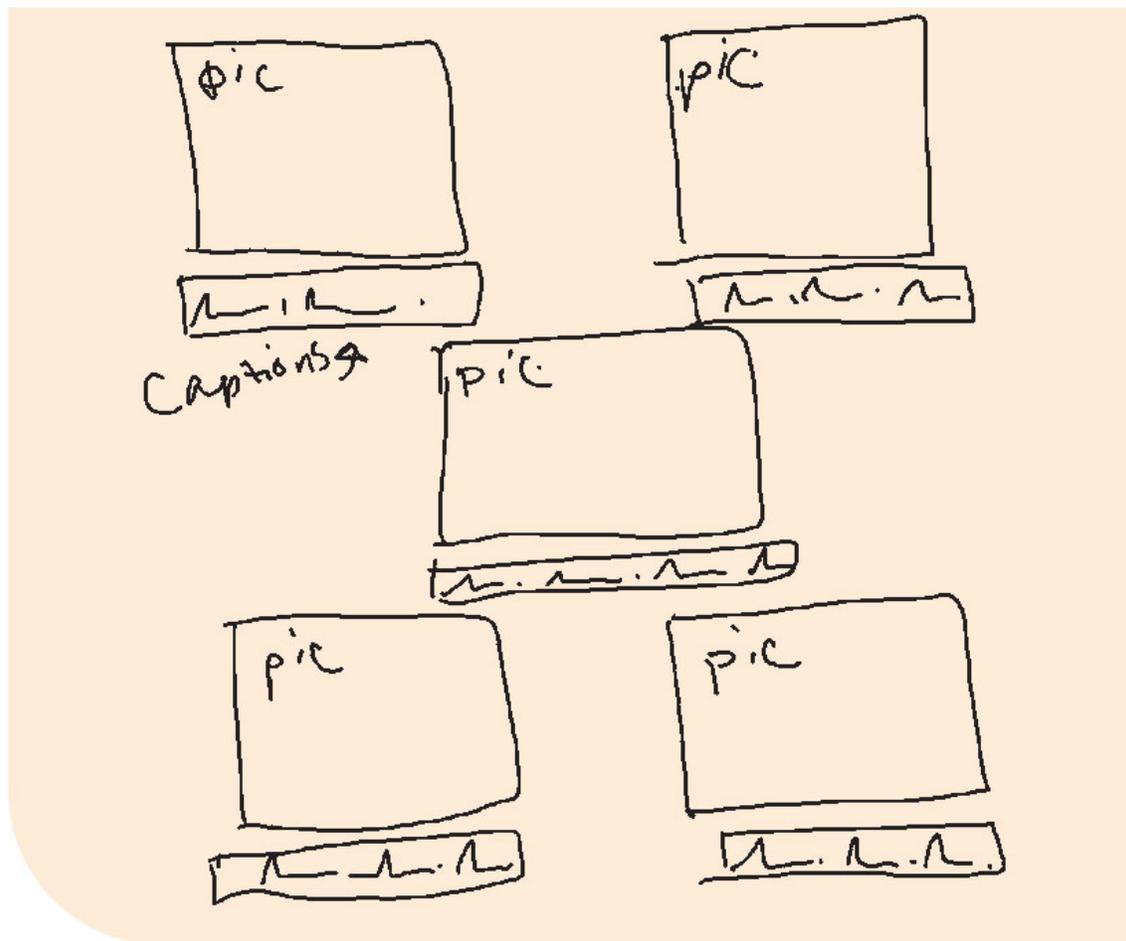FIGURE 2. Get Ready*Do* Done Strategy (whole-class instruction)

When students engage in this visualization, they break down tasks into required steps to achieve the envisioned goal. Having a specific place to start can be less overwhelming and help them initiate. This process is first modeled by the teacher; but gradually, students will learn to assist in and create their own assignment plans.

Another go-to strategy to use for helping students initiate and engage in the next activity is to create a "future sketch" (see Figure 3) of what an open-ended or complex multistep assignment will look like. In the example shown, students were directed to: "Create a poster with a title and five pictures. Be sure to include captions for your pictures."

This strategy can help students visualize the outcome and sequence the steps, allowing them to more accurately size up a task and preventing them from shutting down at first glance of the directions (Ward & Jacobsen, 2014b).

FIGURE 3. Student-Created "Future Sketch"

Working With Inaccurate Thinking

Negative and inaccurate thoughts can derail initiation altogether, causing an anxious student to be unable to engage in schoolwork for reasons that are invisible to others. When we suspect that negative thinking is at work, it should be measured—not assumed—through data gained from interviewing the student about their thoughts and perceptions of the task difficulty, and their ability to be successful with the task. Students can even express this information independently through personal thought journals.

Two accommodations in particular can help anxious students change the thoughts that are preventing them from initiating a task. The first is "Rating the Difficulty." Because writing is difficult to initiate for many anxious students, we will use writing as the example—but these strategies can be applied to any activity. First, have your student use a scale of 1–5 to rate the difficulty of a writing assignment (5 being very difficult) before and after the activity (Minahan, 2014). In the "before" column, the student might rate it "5-very difficult" due to his anxiety-fueled perception. When you ask again, hours after the assignment is completed, the student is more likely to have an accurate perception and rate the assignment as "2-not too difficult." It's important to use the rating sheet for five or more assignments so even if one day the student's pre-assignment rating is an accurate assessment, the overall pattern of inaccurate thinking will be revealed. Showing the student the rating sheet that includes several ratings (5–7 ideally) can help him realize his initial assessment is often off base and can guide him to more accurate thinking about future assignments.

The second accommodation to support the initiation step for anxious students is to "ask students to continue, not start." Teachers often hand out blank paper, explain an assignment, and ask students to begin, only to notice a few minutes later that a student hasn't started the assignment … again. During those six minutes, their anxiety is rising, all-or-nothing thoughts are surfacing, and the required skills are decreasing. Consider reordering this process: Help them start long *before* they are anxious.

Pull the student aside in the morning, preview the assignment, and have them write the first sentence or do the first math problem and then start the next one, stopping mid-sentence or 2/3 of the way through the math problem. You are leaving a dangler on purpose! Then, when the assignment is handed out to the class, you hand the student the previously started paper—essentially asking the student to continue, not start. Instead of the student having an all-or-nothing thought (*I have to write three pages!*), the thought, *I only have to finish the sentence* is much more approachable, and students will often then be able to engage without their inaccurate thinking taking over.

These strategies can give students a more realistic, less overwhelming view of tasks, and most important, teach them to think accurately about future assignments.

Shifting to Independent Engagement

The best way to get students to use these stopping, shifting, and initiation skills and strategies independently is to build their ability to *self-monitor*—to assess what they need and choose a strategy that will help, without relying on the teacher. Once again, a visual is a great way to move the student along the continuum. In Jessica's December 2017/January 2018 *Educational Leadership* article "Helping Anxious Students Move Forward," a sample self-monitoring strategy sheet is included that can help students independently initiate a task. If you build your own self-monitoring outline for students, incorporate the executive functioning strategies from this article and try to avoid omitting strategies that seem obvious—some students need to be taught tools that others use easily (such as chunking or positive thinking).

This self-monitoring sheet could be kept on a student's desk or as a classroom wall chart, allowing the teacher to point to the visual prompt and say, "I see you are having trouble initiating. What strategy would you like to use?" (For example, a strategy for *initiation* might be starting the assignment the day before, leaving a dangler, or using the *Get Ready*Do*Done* template.) Stating that the problem is only *initiation* supports accurate thinking because it emphasizes that a student is having trouble with *one small aspect* of the assignment, not the whole subject. Eventually, the student will be able to use the chart, and strategy, without prompting.

Finally, because we get more of what we reinforce, we must reward students' strategy use or skill practice, rather than just work production (Minahan, 2014). "Catching" students using engagement strategies, such as giving them points on an activity when they use a strategy from the chart, promotes independence and application of task engagement skills, allowing teachers to increase learning time for *every* student in their diverse classrooms.

A Matter of Skill Building

The path to student engagement requires an understanding of the impact of executive functioning deficits and anxiety on students' abilities—and a focus on providing accommodations and skill building. When we give students the supports and skills they need, they can engage in school independently while gaining confidence and self-knowledge.

Reflect & Discuss

What transition during the school day most often causes your anxious students to disengage? What strategy outlined by the authors could help?

How have you seen inaccurate thinking interfere with a student's ability to initiate, persist in, and/or stop an activity?