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## Feature of the Month

### Test Preparation Strategies that Have High and Quick Payoff

By Lin Kuzmich



Test preparation reaches a fever pitch at this time of year, with high-stakes assessments in the majority of states that conduct spring testing. The copy machine is never still, and the computers are burning up the bandwidth. The good news is that there is some interesting research that might help you to make fast gains with three smart test preparation strategies.

1. **Cheer students on to do a great job on what they know and encourage them to take a second look at more challenging items.** The single greatest predictor of student achievement is whether students think that they can be successful. Students typically are already motivated to do well. However, sometimes teachers work so hard in focusing on deficit areas that they forget to tell their class what students already do achieve in terms of objectives, benchmarks, and/or skills. In addition, asking students to set a goal, such as performing 10% better than the last test or correctly answering five more test items, can have amazing achievement implications. A student who sets a personal and specific goal to read easy items carefully and answers them first, then tries to answer five harder items correctly by re-reading or noting key vocabulary clues, is an effective technique that helps them improve. Giving students a goal and a well-rehearsed specific plan for what to do when items become more challenging helps them to reach higher achievement standards.
2. **Give students a heads-up about the specific content on the test.** Students should be able to tell the content or topic from a prompt or a multiple-choice test question. Research indicates that students who can discern, for example, a linear equation problem or a English language arts prompt about mood and tone are 50% more likely to answer the multiple-choice item correctly and are more likely to answer the prompt in a written

response. So, when you offer practice items to students, ask them to go through the questions and prompts, list the topic or content in the margin, and then answer the question.

- 3. Organize several multiple-choice questions and cut off the prompt from the A-D or A-E answers.** If students can tell either the topic or content of a multiple-choice item and they are able to eliminate two or three wrong answers with good rationale, they are 75% more likely to select the right answer from the remaining two choices. Put the prompts in one bag and the block of A-D or A-E answers in another bag. (Make up enough of these sets for every two or three students in the class.) Ask students to compare the prompt to the correct set of choices for answers until they match. Students also can list the topic or content, eliminate the wrong answers, and then defend the right answer. The discussion alone is a good test-taking rehearsal. Remember that all content is a foreign language that must be taught. When you don't speak quadratic equations for a couple of months, students may forget key vocabulary and skills. Students who don't speak or work with that language for a period of time will need a review. Plan for yearlong reviews of skills and knowledge and conduct an immediate review two or three weeks prior to any test.

The hope is that these simple moves will provide ideas for test preparation that really work. Try all three strategies as you prepare students for high-stakes state and national assessments. In addition, these strategies work well when reviewing for class assessments at any level, including high school end-of-course exams. Remember that any learning environment starts with great relationships, continues with rigorous and relevant instruction, and concludes with student confidence as they approach assessments. If you believe students can succeed, then they will indeed do better on any assessment.

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