



Six Steps to Conquer the Chaos: How to Organize & Motivate Students for Success

Step One of Six Steps to Conquer the Chaos: How to Organize & Motivate Students for Success

I told you that I have a "magic bullet" that turns most of my unmotivated students into eager participants.

As I shared, I've been dealing with the issue of motivation since I met my first tutoring client nearly 20 years ago. He clearly did not want to work with me (at first), nor have most of the students in my study skills classes ever since. So I always open my classes by asking them, point blank...

"How many of you are here because a parent, teacher, or counselor made you come to this class?"

80% of the hands go up! (A few of the remaining 20% shoot their hands up at the last second, realizing they probably shouldn't admit that they want to be there.)

So, I nod my head and explain that I fully understand...

"I get it. I know you're already tired of doing homework. You're tired of slogging through school and fighting with your parents over schoolwork. The last thing you want to do is sit here and listen to me shove more work down your throat.

"The good news is, that's not what I want for you, either. I want you to be successful in school, but I want you to do that with lots of free time left over. You need time for fun in your life--that is what makes life enjoyable. Fun time is also important for adults.

"I want you to earn better grades... in less time! I'll show you how to make schoolwork easier. Much easier! No one has ever taught you *how* to learn or get organized, but you can use strategies to do homework and study faster... and get better results! Strategies apply to learning just like they apply to sports, video games, and getting what you want from your parents!"

By this time, nearly all of the students are listening intently. I spoke their language and they are beginning to trust me. This honesty is what your students will need from you.

The On/Off Switch to Learning

Priscilla Vail, author of *Smart Kids with School Problems*, says that emotions are the on/off switch to learning. My words to my students include two strategies that encourage them to keep their "learning switch" in the "on" position.

First, I acknowledge how they feel. I offer sincere empathy for their frustrations (so much work) and desires (more free time). They appreciate knowing that these feelings are "okay" for them to have, and that I "get it."

Second, I focus on what they *really* want: success and more free time. The number one reason students are reluctant to learn "study skills" is that they think the only way to do better in school is to work *harder*. When they learn that they can be successful without hours and hours of extra work, objections melt away.

If you think about it, children are no different from us. They don't like lots and lots of work. They also hate it when something is shoved down their throat, the same way we'd hate it if our principal or administrator came to us and said, "I don't like the way you organize your desk, so *this* is how you're going to do it!" as he slammed a new whiz-bang program in front of us. Even if we thought our desk could be better organized, we would still appreciate some respect.

So, approach your students the same way you would want your administrator to approach you. Respect and acknowledge their feelings, then focus on the benefits of better grades *in less time*.

Is this enough to turn every child or teen into a highly motivated student?

Obviously, no... but it is a solid, simple start. Next, I will share an important second step for all students, and the second "magic bullet," which gets even the most reserved and reluctant students involved.

Step Two of Six Steps to Conquer the Chaos: How to Organize & Motivate Students for Success

"I'd say only about 25% of my students are motivated," said Vivian, a teacher of at-risk students. "The rest don't care about anything. They don't respond to anything."

Vivian is one of the many teachers I've met who feels like she has to do so much more... with so much less! (I certainly relate.) She called in during an "Ask the Author" session to ask me what she could do to inspire motivation. Teachers and parents all over the country, from every type of background, are echoing her concerns. Of course, I've already shared one strategy for reaching reluctant learners in the previous email.

But, what do you do when the vast majority of your students don't care? Or, how do you reach those few who are determined to remain closed and guarded?

Vivian was using SOAR with her students, so I asked if she had covered some of the strategies that I know to be most popular with students--specifically those that are the most "hands-on." She confirmed that she had tried a few things, but said that the students just didn't CARE.

That was the key word... CARE!

So I asked, "What about the section on Multiple Intelligences?" The very first section of our program, *HOW Are You Smart?*, has students explore their unique interests, talents, and gifts through a few interactive activities. "Oh! They loved it," she answered. "Especially the kids that needed it the most... it was very powerful and they were so excited!" I heard her come to life when she answered that question; she was excited and *knew* that she reached many her students with that topic!

Aha... she was on to something! She was nurturing their spirit, acknowledging the things that made them feel special. Sadly, most of these kids have never had that type of positive feedback.

Most students--regardless of socio-economic background--do *not* get enough of this positive feedback. They come to school and lose all their freedom. Federal and state policies dictate what they have to learn, not the teachers who know and care for them personally. The content feels completely irrelevant to their lives.

When you reach out to acknowledge students' individual spirits, they wake up! Even Vivian "woke up" while she was speaking with me; she felt her students come alive and that inspired her. I could *feel* her energy shift through the telephone line--several states away!

The Multiple Intelligences

Harvard professor Dr. Howard Gardner believes in celebrating "intellectual diversity," which is an excellent way to acknowledge and ignite the spirit in your students. Dr. Gardner developed the theory of Multiple Intelligences, believing that human beings are capable of at least eight different forms of intelligence, each with many viable career avenues. Unfortunately, traditional schoolwork and assessments typically only address two domains of intelligence: math and language.

I have personally seen hundreds of students change dramatically when they began to view themselves through the lens of *multiple* intelligences, not just the narrow focus of "schoolwork." Obviously, Vivian had a glimpse of this, too. The concept of Multiple Intelligences helps students understand that there are many more dimensions to their intelligence than the results they generate in school. I suggested that Vivian forget about everything else she was trying to teach (for a little while, anyway). "You can't get anywhere with them if they don't care about their future or even see a future. Spend all of your energies talking about their intelligences, strengths, and how they can make a difference in this world! *Then* you will have luck with study skills.

She loved this and took it a step further. "Instead of asking 'Why didn't you do this or that?' I'm going to ask, 'What's good about you? What are your intelligences/interests? How can you make a positive change?'"

Take a moment to imagine yourself in these students' position, with a boss or administrator barking at you all of the time, "Why didn't you do this? Why can't you do that?" Now, imagine that same person asking you the more compassionate questions that Vivian developed?

Which would be more likely to motivate *you*?

Just as Vivian did, you can experience the same breakthrough and inspiration with your students. Focus on what they *can* do. Ask them how they can make this planet a better place. Have them explore their Multiple Intelligences.

Step Three of Six Steps to Conquer the Chaos: How to Organize & Motivate Students for Success

One of the most popular blog posts I ever wrote was about my son in Disney World. Of all of the rides across the four theme parks, his favorite was the ever-so-simple Dumbo ride.

Why?

Because *he* could control when he went up and down! With all of the adventures and attractions in Disney World, 60 seconds of control trumped all of it! Apparently, he's not the only child overtaken with joy by this concept; there is *always* a long line at Dumbo! Disney has even added at least three more rides just like it in other areas of the parks.

Never underestimate the power of control! Especially *simple* control.

Control in the classroom is very motivating, too. Students thrive when given a "voice" in the class. It's human nature to desire a sense of control at any age, whether we are 2 or 92.

When you feel like you constantly have to do more with less, choices are a real gem!

Choices are a simple way to leverage your time and energy. They give your students a great sense of *appropriate* control in your classroom; you give them options and the freedom to exercise their own choices, but you contain those options to match your objectives.

When you honor students' choices, you communicate a strong sense of respect towards them. In turn, students will trust you and be more responsive. As the Dumbo ride at Disney World illustrates, choices don't have to be "big" to be significant. Simple choices are *very* powerful!

17 Ways to Provide Choices in the Classroom

Here's a list of examples for providing choices in the classroom...right away! Some apply to any situation and some are specific to the SOAR Curriculum, but they will all help inspire ideas to get you started. Of course, there are countless options, limited only by your creativity.

Notice how each choice below is: 1) truly simple and 2) reasonable for you to manage in the classroom. Do not let their simplicity fool you; even "small" choices are very powerful!

1. Do you want to work independently or with a partner?
2. Do you want the lights on or off?
3. Do you want to have music on or off?
4. Would you rather work on the floor or in your seat?

5. Do you want to read the chapter by yourself or with a partner?
6. Do you want to create your goal plan by yourself or with a partner?
7. Do you want to read Chapter 4 on your own, or have small groups role-play each section of the timeline for the whole class?
8. Do you want a 1" or 1.5" binder?
9. What color binders do you want: red, yellow, blue, or black?
10. In what order do you want to organize the folders in your binder?
11. For Chapter 6, do you want to submit a before/after photo of your room at home for a class contest?
12. Do you want to practice Chapter 9 with one of your own textbooks or use one from this classroom?
13. Choose topic one, two, or three for your writing assignment.
14. Will you take notes with a pen, pencil, colored pencil, or thin-line marker?
15. Do you want to do 8 or 10 practice problems for your math test?
16. Do you want to answer the lesson review questions on paper or out loud?
17. Do you want to do your exit presentation as a report, make a slide presentation, or create a website?

Pick one, or create your own, and give your students at least one choice during your very next class! You will notice an improvement in their response to you and their level of motivation after doing this just a couple of times, but make it a "regular" thing to get maximum benefits.

Step Four of Six Steps to Conquer the Chaos: How to Organize & Motivate Students for Success

Disorganization is one of the top complaints I hear from parents and educators.

Teachers talk about their frustration with missing assignments! Students are failing classes simply because they lack the organizational skills to keep track of their assignments.

School counselors and psychologists tell about the huge number of students referred to them for suspected learning disabilities, only to discover that a large percentage of these students simply lack organizational skills.

Parents are totally dismayed because they try to keep everything organized, but they aren't at school to oversee organization, when it seems to matter most.

Why Is This Happening?

There are three reasons students have a difficult time staying organized:

1. **They have too much "stuff."** Most students have 12 to 16 different folders and notebooks to keep track of across a whole lot of transitions: from home, in the car/bus, to school, in the locker, back into the book bag, into class, back to the locker, and then home again. (Elementary students may only have a half dozen folders, but that's still five more than they *should* have!)
2. **Everything looks alike.** When those folders and notebooks are stacked in the locker or book bag, they all look the same!
3. **Any time students are managing papers, they are in a hurry.** Whether they are rushing out of class at the end of an hour, rushing from their locker at the end of the day, or rushing to finish their homework at home, they are *always* in a hurry.

Let's Relate This to Our Lives as Adults...

Imagine having 12 to 16 different email accounts to maintain every day. Imagine if you were expected to log into each account several times each day, respond to emails, and retrieve old/sent emails at the snap of a finger? It would be overwhelming to transition between them quickly.

This is what students deal with every day, managing so many different school supplies.

They have the added burden of managing these materials across several daily transitions.

Teachers have good intentions when they ask students to maintain a separate folder and notebook for their class; they think that separate supplies will make it easier for students to keep science papers organized in the science folder and math papers organized in the math folder.

However, this traditional system is actually *creating* the problem. The sheer volume of folders and notebooks (not to mention textbooks and workbooks) makes it hard for students to find the right ones, especially when they are in a hurry!

As a result, students haphazardly throw papers the first place they can. Later, they have no idea what they did with their papers. Papers can be anywhere...

Everyday Students, Everyday Problems

Rhonda's teacher passed out homework to each student as they walked out of class this morning.

Rhonda had a full stack of books in her arms and her bag was over her shoulder. Her teacher placed the paper on top of her books as she raced off to her next class. Rhonda didn't notice the paper flying right out of her arms as she plowed her way through the crowded hallway.

When Ryan got his homework this afternoon, he folded and placed it neatly inside his notebook. At his locker two hours later, Ryan looked at his notebook and thought, "I don't need this for homework," and put it back in his locker. When he got home to do that worksheet, he couldn't remember where he put it. He lost 45 minutes digging through his bag, searching inside all of his folders, books, and notebooks. Finally, he concluded that he didn't have the assignment and couldn't do it.

Gunner was rushing to catch his bus at the end of the day, when he stopped at his locker. He knew he had math homework, so he grabbed what he thought was his math notebook. But when he got home, he realized that he had actually grabbed his science notebook instead.

Colleen finished up all of her homework at home, quickly! "DONE!" she thought. She excitedly jumped up and went off to watch TV. When she got to school the next morning, her homework was still sitting where she left it the night before.

Dan was just as eager to finish his homework and hit the "Done!" button in his brain. He even remembered to toss his homework in his bag to be sure it got back to school the next day.

As he continued to clean up his work, he put a couple of textbooks back in his bag, too. The next morning, he shoved his lunch on top of his books, and flung the bag over his shoulder. He walked to the bus stop, and then down the long hallways to his first class. By the time he looked for his homework paper in class, he couldn't find it. He didn't know that it had been mashed to a pulp under his lunch and books.

Dan's parents are frustrated because they saw him do that homework. They can't figure out why he can't turn his assignments in to his teacher. The blame game begins, everyone is disappointed in Dan, and Dan is totally mystified.

How Can You Possibly Solve These Problems?

The first step in the organizing process is to eliminate the unnecessary items filling the book bag. This includes old papers, crusty lunches from two weeks ago, and anything else that is not strictly needed for school. Then, develop a routine for maintaining order in the book bag. (This can be done in school or at home; see Step 5.)

Next, eliminate folders and notebooks. You can do more than just make a dent! It is possible to condense the mountain of folders and notebooks into ONE 1-inch or 1.5-inch binder. Replace two-pocket folders with poly binder pockets. Replace spiral notebooks with loose-leaf notebook paper, organized behind each folder. Now, students have only ONE tool for organization instead of 12 to 16.

The binder works best as part of a simple organizational system. This system has been adopted by thousands of schools nationwide and the feedback is overwhelmingly positive!

As you may have seen in my video about the brain circuit, the SOAR Binder System has 72% fewer steps than the usual system for keeping papers organized. This makes students far more likely to keep their assignments organized and turned in on time! Check out the video [here](#).

Step Five of Six Steps to Conquer the Chaos: How to Organize & Motivate Students for Success

Step 5 of this series is a 2-for-1 — two great benefits from one simple strategy!

Sometimes, simplicity is difficult to comprehend. For some reason, we naturally make things more complicated than necessary. Nowhere is that more evident than in school.

We were raised to believe that learning is "hard work" and that being a good student means hours of labor. We have passed that notion on to our students. As a result, we often believe that many of our students would "get it" if they just tried harder.

However, the idea that learning has to be a lot of dreadful labor does a lot of damage.

First, it causes students to associate learning with negative feelings. With our natural curiosity and ability to learn, we should be celebrating opportunities to learn! Instead, we think of learning as painful and boring. This makes us, as teachers, feel as if we are fighting a constant uphill battle. Well...we are!

Second, it is a false premise. No one likes to fail. Nearly every student enters school with a natural desire to succeed and feel good about themselves. They start out wanting to try their best. However, when students who struggle are told that they just need to "try harder," they get confused; they are already trying hard, and it isn't working. They don't know *how* to try harder. Eventually, they find it easier to stop trying than to face repeated failures and confusion. This is when they get labeled as "lazy" and are made to feel as if there is something inherently wrong with them.

Finally, it destroys students' quality of life. Students spend 13+ years of their life in school, believing that it all has to be a chore. I believe in the merits of hard work, but "hard work" shouldn't be synonymous with "misery." We accept it as normal, but it doesn't have to be that way.

It would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if it *wasn't* that way!

Every aspect of our lives can be simplified if we look for the right leverage points. To be honest, I know I haven't discovered 90% of my options for simplifying my life. But I do know how to simplify learning, making school less of a chore for my students and making my job as a teacher quite a bit easier!

I "accidentally" discovered study skills in college, and they transformed my life! I started out struggling all the way from kindergarten to 12th grade. Once I learned *how* to learn, I easily

earned a 3.9 GPA in college. Since then, I have spent over 20 years studying the brain and the processes for learning. The following is one of many great "shortcuts" I have discovered.

Take Ten!

"Take Ten" is a daily, ten-minute routine that improves on the two key elements of improving grades: organization and learning. It is intended to be used at home, with homework; however, you can start by introducing a ten-minute review/organization session at the end of your class for a few weeks.

I know it can be hard to sacrifice ten minutes of class time every day (even five minutes is better than nothing), but it will pay dividends soon enough! Once your students experience the power of "Taking Ten," they can transition to doing it at home.

How It Works

When students sit down to do their homework each evening, they should take the first ten minutes to organize papers and review notes from *all* of their classes:

- TWO minutes to clean out the book bag and organize papers in folders or a binder.
- EIGHT minutes to review all the notes and handouts that were distributed throughout the day.

This daily review helps the brain process information much faster, dramatically reduces study time for tests, helps students work through their homework faster, and ensures that assignments get turned in!

Why Does It Work?

This process is very brain-friendly. It caters to the way the brain works on several levels:

- **Reviewing information within 24 hours helps the brain transfer information from short-term to long-term memory.**
- **A review allows the brain to make new connections with information, making long-term recall easier.** The brain works best when it has time to let new information "simmer" and be processed by the unconscious mind.
- **Students more easily shift into higher levels of thinking, moving up Maslow's hierarchy.** I call this "high-gear learning." When reviewing new information at a different time and/or in a different setting, the brain develops a new perspective on information.

This new perspective allows the brain to channel the information at higher levels, moving beyond rote recall.

- **"Take Ten" makes higher-level thinking and organization familiar processes for the brain!** Habits get hard-coded into the brain; when neuron pathways are used several times, the brain takes note and coats those neuron pathways with a substance called myelin to preserve them. Take Ten is a simple habit to develop. It won't take long before high-gear learning and organization become permanent for your students.

"Take Ten!" is just one of many strategies that help teachers transfer the responsibility of learning back to the student.

Step Six of Six Steps to Conquer the Chaos: How to Organize & Motivate Students for Success

The final step of organization--and the last of the Six Steps to Conquer the Chaos--is about how you organize your time in the classroom. As I shared previously, students can harness a *lot* more power than we typically realize from short amounts of time.

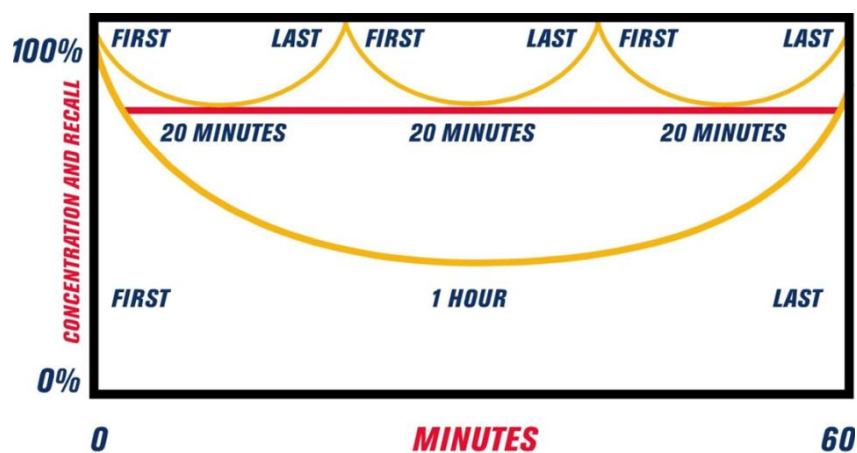
The same benefits of short bursts apply to teaching. If you adopt this concept, you can reduce your fatigue and increase your effectiveness. How's that for a win-win scenario?

"Small Chunk" Learning

We have a lot of "cave-man" in our DNA. We're still mentally optimized for hunting food and running away from threats, which means our bodies and brains are designed to sustain short periods of high-level energy and concentration, not long, drawn-out learning sessions. The more we can accommodate shorter sessions in our learning (and teaching) the more we are working with the physiological makeup of the brain.

There's another reason I support "small chunk" learning: our brain has a tendency to remember the first and last things we learn in a series. Increasing the number of "firsts and lasts" increases our retention. If too much happens in "the middle," it tends to get lost or disorganized in the brain. The shorter sessions yield more effective results.

The diagram below helps to illustrate the different levels of retention between a long, 60-minute study session and three 20-minute study sessions in the same time. See how the information represented by the yellow arches dips below the red "concentration and recall" threshold in the longer lesson, but not in the shorter ones.



From "Where's There's A Will There's an A"
by Professor Claude W. Olney

"Teachers are not keeping these mini-lessons 'mini!'" I heard this at a lecture by the Ph.D author of a well-known reading series, and right away I knew what he was talking about. I was guilty as charged!

As a teacher, I had a tendency to drill and drill on concepts. I would think, "It looks like they aren't getting it. I guess I have to extend this lesson a bit more instead of moving on to the next topic." Before I knew it, a 20-minute lesson would have stretched to 45 minutes, but I don't think I ever felt much better about the students' progress.

As a student, I would hold marathon study sessions for hours at a time. These were pure misery for me, but that was how I thought studying worked. After all, I thought I wouldn't really deserve an "A" without hours of blood, sweat, and tears to show for it.

Watching It Work

Most recently, I have been reaping the rewards of short study sessions with my first-grade son. With his attention span, we get five minutes (ten, at best) of good learning time before he's flitting out of his seat, falling over on the table, and totally out of sync. We make our best progress when we keep his work sessions to under ten minutes.

This means that his daily homework tasks are spread out over the day. It can be really hard for me to do, since I would rather just get it done in one shot, but it works!

This concept has applications for older students, too. Not too long ago, my husband Brian (a high school teacher), came home very frustrated. His seniors had been struggling with an important topic that they had to master to graduate. For their exit interviews, students would have to highlight 14 different career-related skills they had learned in high school and explain how those skills would help them in the work world. Many students were failing their interviews because their career connections were weak.

A lack of time frustrated Brian more than anything else. For a variety of reasons, he just didn't have the time to give this topic the level of attention he felt it deserved. Brian's situation was not unique. We all have times when we think we don't have the time to teach or learn what we need to.

In those situations, we often need to flip things around...and go shorter! I suggested that he try "rapid fire" review sessions for the first and last five minutes of each class period for the next week. "Pick one of the 14 skills and call on students to describe a career connection in 30 seconds or less. Then, give a quick 'thumbs-up' or a brief explanation of how they should correct

or expand their connection. Then, keep going. Keep it fast-paced and very focused." He followed my advice, and it worked, all of his students ended up passing their exit interviews!

For another example, an elementary school in Detroit was under serious pressure to improve its reading scores. They determined their students' primary need was to build reading speed and comprehension. So, they had students start every day by finding a reading partner, and taking turns reading to each other for five minutes. They would graph the number of words they read per minute, and share a short summary of the reading passage with a friend. If they didn't meet their target reading speed, they reread the passage the next day, and the next day, until they met the target reading speed set by their teacher.

This simple morning routine *dramatically* improved reading scores throughout the building! As a bonus, it dramatically reduced the truancy rate, as well. Students were begging their parents to get them to school on time so they could "graph their reading." They were *really* motivated by being able to see their progress.

I love this story because of how it illustrates major gains from a small, focused amount of time, and illustrates a powerful type of student motivation.

Brief Recap:

Step 1: Acknowledge students' feelings about school and homework. Emphasize better grades in *less* time.

Step 2: Nurture students' individual spirits and "wake them up" in school! Explore their Multiple Intelligences... and celebrate them!

Step 3: Provide choices. Keep them simple and provide them often!

Step 4: Get students organized by eliminating multiple folders and notebooks, condensing all of their supplies into *one* binder (no larger than 1.5" in diameter).

Step 5: "Take Ten." Students save hours of homework and study time by taking ten minutes every day to organize their papers and review notes: two minutes to clean out their bags and sort papers in their binder, and eight minutes to review notes from the day.

Step 6: Organize your instruction time around "small chunk" learning to reduce your fatigue and get maximum results from your students! Share the small-chunk learning graph with them so they can *internalize* the benefits, too.