

# 10 Small Changes That Help Every Student Succeed

## Supporting Students to Succeed with Low-Resource, High-Impact Strategies

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When we think about making a difference for our students, it can feel overwhelming. But meaningful change doesn't always require a grand gesture. Sometimes, it's the smallest shifts that unlock a student's potential.

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### 1. Sensitive Seating Plans

**What it is:** Thoughtfully placing students in seats that support their comfort, focus, and emotional regulation.

**Why it works:** The physical environment can be a major source of distraction or distress. For neurodivergent students, those with sensory processing needs, or those feeling socially anxious, seating can make or break a lesson.

**Putting it into practice:**

- Ask students where they feel most focused or safe.
- Seat anxious students near exits or calm areas.
- Avoid placing easily distracted students by windows or doorways.
- In early years, use quiet corners or zones to give children choice and comfort.
- Create buffer zones for students who need personal space (e.g. use furniture or storage as soft dividers).

**Try it when:** A student struggles to focus, is often unsettled, or regularly asks to leave the room.

### 2. Flexible Deadlines

**What it is:** Offering more time for students to complete work when needed, without punishment.

**Why it works:** For some students, especially those with anxiety, perfectionism, or processing differences, fixed deadlines create unnecessary pressure. Flexibility can reduce avoidance and improve the quality of work.

**Putting it into practice:**

- Build in natural extensions: "Due Thursday, but Friday is fine if you need more time."
- Allow extra time without needing a formal request.
- Space out deadlines across subjects to prevent overload.
- Check in one-to-one: "Would more time help you do your best on this?"

**Try it when:** You notice last-minute panic, avoidance, or incomplete work.

### 3. Written and Verbal Instructions

**What it is:** Providing instructions in multiple formats to improve clarity and reduce anxiety.

**Why it works:** Some students struggle to process spoken instructions; others miss written ones. Reinforcing information in different formats supports understanding and memory.

**Putting it into practice:**

- Say it, write it, and show it where possible.
- Use visual schedules or checklists.
- Repeat rather than rephrase unless asked: "Would you like me to say that another way?"
- Display key task steps on the board or desk.

**Try it when:** A student often asks what to do, starts tasks late, or seems confused.

### 4. Visual Timers

**What it is:** Using visual countdowns to show how much time is left for a task or transition.

**Why it works:** Many students (especially ADHD or autistic students) find time abstract and anxiety-inducing. A visual timer creates predictability and structure.

**Putting it into practice:**

- Use sand timers, countdown apps, or online tools on the board.
- Let students know how long they have and what comes next.
- For younger children, use pictures or colour-coded timers.

**Try it when:** Students resist transitions, struggle to pace themselves, or frequently ask "How long left?"

### 5. Movement Breaks

**What it is:** Incorporating short bursts of physical activity to reset focus and energy.

**Why it works:** Movement helps regulate sensory systems, improves focus, and supports emotional regulation.

**Putting it into practice:**

- Offer short breaks after periods of focus.
- Use jobs (delivering messages, wiping boards) as purposeful movement.
- Set up a "movement menu" for students to choose from (e.g. stretch, walk, shake).

**Try it when:** A student becomes fidgety, frustrated, or zoned out.

## 6. Reduced Classroom Noise

**What it is:** Being intentional about the classroom soundscape to support focus and calm.

**Why it works:** Noise is a major source of stress for many students. A calmer environment can aid attention and reduce dysregulation.

**Putting it into practice:**

- Use soft furnishings to absorb sound.
- Set "quiet zones" or use noise-reducing headphones.
- Use sound cues (chimes, gentle music) to signal transitions.
- Keep background noise (videos, conversations) minimal during task time.

**Try it when:** Students cover their ears, complain of headaches, or struggle with sustained focus.

## 7. Multiple Submission Formats

**What it is:** Letting students choose how to demonstrate their learning.

**Why it works:** Flexibility honours different strengths and removes barriers to success.

**Putting it into practice:**

- Accept written work, videos, voice notes, diagrams, or models.
- Let students present orally or visually.
- For reluctant writers, try graphic organisers or collaborative tasks.
- Secondary: offer presentation or essay options.

**Try it when:** A student avoids tasks, is visibly anxious, or has known processing or writing challenges.

## 8. Interactive Participation Options

**What it is:** Offering multiple ways to join in without always speaking out loud.

**Why it works:** Some students want to contribute but freeze under pressure. Alternatives build confidence.

**Putting it into practice:**

- Use mini whiteboards, voting cards, or shared documents.
- Allow written contributions during discussions.
- Use think-pair-share before calling on individuals.

**Try it when:** Students disengage, stay silent, or show anxiety when asked to speak.

## 9. Effort-Based Praise

**What it is:** Focusing feedback on what a student has *done*, not just what they've *achieved*.

**Why it works:** Shifts focus from being "good at" to "getting better"—great for growth mindset.

### Putting it into practice:

- Praise specific behaviours: "You kept going even when that got tricky."
- Use non-verbal praise (thumbs up, nod, smile).
- Encourage self-praise: "What part are you most proud of?"

**Try it when:** A student avoids risk, fears failure, or fixates on being perfect.

## 10. Choice in Assignment Topic or Format

**What it is:** Letting students tailor their work to their interests or preferred styles.

**Why it works:** Choice fosters autonomy and engagement. Students work harder when they feel invested.

### Putting it into practice:

- Let them pick a topic within a broader theme.
- Offer 2–3 different formats (e.g. poster, podcast, slideshow).
- In primary, use "learning menus" for independent projects.

**Try it when:** A student lacks motivation, struggles with attention, or disengages quickly.

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*Every teacher, TA, mentor or school staff member can make a difference. These small changes don't require permission or policy shifts—they just require intention. Start with one idea that feels doable this week. Reflect on the impact. Share your wins with others. You might be surprised just how far one small change can reach.*

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