



## Ten Daily Practices to Engage All Students

**What to do:** Review these practices and select any that you think need greater attention in your program. Then write down the steps you'll take to follow through. Share your suggestions with others in your program to get their input and cooperation.

**Why it matters:** Best practices such as daily routines, relevant activities, and student voice and choice provide structure, consistency, and empowerment that help to engage students and improve behavior.

### 1. Use Routines and Structures to Establish a Consistent Program

#### What to Know

Consistent, explicit program routines and structures enable all learners to fully engage. Create expectations for how students access their materials, move about the room, and follow routines for homework and activities. Create an environment where the challenges come from learning new content and solving problems, not from figuring out new procedures.

#### Try This

- Create and communicate consistent structures. How will students enter the room? How will students participate? Can they engage with peers during transitions?
- If you want something specific, teach it!
- Remember: Students come to your program from different school-day teachers and classrooms, where structures and expectations vary. So, be explicit about teaching your structures and routines to set everyone up for success.

### 2. Make Program Activities Relevant to Your Students

#### What to Know

Have you ever had a student who engaged in your program but seemed disengaged in the school-day setting? It might be because the program content, delivery, or activity felt more relevant, "real," or action oriented than what they experienced at school. Students, like anyone, are more likely to engage in an activity if it speaks to their needs and interests.

#### Try This

- Invite students to suggest ways to make activities more interesting and relevant. Ask, "What do you think would help you understand this this subject better?"
- Pair academic content with a learning activity that will feel relevant and "real" to the student. For example, instead of having students write a persuasive speech, have them create text messages, tweets, or social media content to influence a particular audience.
- Find cross-curricular opportunities to connect the less relevant content to that which is more interesting or relevant to the student, thereby making it of "more value."



### 3. Consider Disabilities and Abilities

#### What to Know

Students with disabilities also have great abilities, so it's important to understand both. You don't need to be a special education teacher to support students with learning disabilities in your out-of-school time program. Including and engaging all students in the educational environment, to the benefit of all, builds their confidence, feelings of belonging, and mutual understanding.

#### Try This

- Work with school-day teachers to plan a variety of ways to help students learn and practice. If your program uses a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) that aligns with the school-day approach, it can help you differentiate tasks and assess student growth.
- Incorporate small groups, varied learning activities, and flexible scheduling so that differences between learners are less detectable by other students.
- Help students identify, use, and develop their individual strengths.

### 4. Take a Strengths-Based Approach to Student Development

#### What to Know

This type of teaching and learning approach promotes an environment where students become aware of their value, worth, and abilities rather than focusing on weaknesses.

#### Try This

- Use positive language.
- Highlight growth areas.
- When initiating a collaborative project, encourage students to voice what they can add to the activity (instead of focusing only on what part they'd like to do).

### 5. Set High but Reachable Expectations

#### What to Know

Our perceptions of our students may change what we expect from them. When this happens, students may feel bored, defeated, or hopeless. A strengths-based approach supports student growth because [teachers' expectations of students can affect their performance.](#)

#### Try This

- Communicate high expectations and provide support to students to increase engagement (e.g., proximal seating, lots of eye contact, praise).
- Provide feedback to all students; include constructive feedback for improvement so that all students understand expectations. Share rubrics at the start of an activity to help students understand and meet the highest level of expectations.
- Create a mindset that no matter how a student performed in the past, you can help to move that student's learning forward.



## 6. Provide Opportunities for Student Voice and Choice

### What to Know

Student choice empowers learners by giving them some independence to define and monitor their own learning goals. For partially engaged or disengaged learners, this may require additional support, but the results are well worth the effort.

### Try This

- Start small by offering a choice of activities that pair with learning standards, a choice of groups, or even a choice of seats in the afterschool space.
- Try using a menu — all the options are OK with you, but the student gets to control the type of activity.
- Digital, paper, or performance — allow students to choose which format they'll use to complete an assignment or activity.

## 7. Build Trusting Relationships

### What to Know

Educator-student relationships built on mutual respect, understanding, and trust are crucial. These are not about friendships, fun, giggles, or “being cool.” Building trust may take *intentional effort over time*, especially with a student who's only partially engaged, but it's an investment worth making. Guidance and support from a caring adult can break patterns of negative behavior and disengagement that interfere with program activities and with student success — now and in the future.

### Try This

- Greet students by name daily.
- Honor your students' talents and interests by seeing and treating them as unique people, without stereotyping them.
- Be a good listener; model active listening when your students want to talk to you, and let them know you value your time together.

## 8. Provide Opportunities for Students to Respond and to Get Feedback

### What to Know

Opportunities to respond (OTR) is an effective, evidence-based teaching strategy that uses adult or peer questioning, student response, and immediate feedback. Offering more frequent opportunities to respond increases academic engagement.

### Try This

- Ask questions that stimulate interest and curiosity.
- Use participatory response options (like thumbs up/thumbs down) to engage all students.
- Praise the effort a student puts forth rather than praising “smarts” (e.g., say “you used good strategies to reach a solution” rather than saying “good job” or “you're so smart”).



## 9. Recognize the Possible Signs, Causes, and Effects of Stress

### What to Know

Student stress can have various causes and can negatively impact a student's ability to focus, learn, remember, and engage. Some sources of stress are beyond your program's control, but others are within your sphere of influence.

### Try This

- Communicate instructions and expectations clearly and consistently.
- Teach and model stress reduction and coping skills like mindfulness practices and self-talk, and provide opportunities for practice.
- Learn to recognize and respond to student behaviors that may be rooted in trauma. See the [21<sup>st</sup> CCLC NTAC website](#) for helpful resources on this topic.
- Always demonstrate and model empathy when working with students.

## 10. Promote Health and Wellness for All

### What to Know

Improving students' health and wellness can have a positive influence on their school and program engagement and on their mental health and behavior.

### Try This

- Connect students and families to community health and wellness resources to improve access.
- Include opportunities for sports or movement every day.
- Design activities that teach students about nutrition, sleep, exercise, and stress reduction.

*Your positive thoughts make your environment positive,  
and your positive environment fills your life with abundance and growth.*

—S. K. Mathuriya

This resource was developed in 2024 by the Nita M. Lowey 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), funded under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and administered by Synergy Enterprises, Inc. under Cooperative Agreement No. 287E230009 with the Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Department or the federal government. This resource is in the public domain and is available at [21stcclcntac.org](https://21stcclcntac.org). Authorization to reproduce it in

