



Elevating a Positive School Environment

Resources for Leaders

NIET

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

INTRODUCTION

This school year is an especially challenging one for teachers and school leaders. At NIET, we have worked with partners across the country to navigate what teaching and learning looks like throughout the pandemic, and we know how challenging it can be to foster a school culture that is focused on driving student growth when educators are faced with low morale or burnout and when achievement may have stalled.

Often, we find that ideas for supporting educators in this season only touch the surface level of support. While there is no simple roadmap, we have a few tools designed to help create stronger school and classroom environments. This guide aims to support school leaders as they intentionally foster both classrooms and a schoolwide culture where every person and every strength is celebrated. These resources build off NIET's research-based supports, such as our *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric*, and two decades of coaching experience. They provide ideas for how school leaders and coaches can build a strong environment through having positive, productive conversations about teaching and learning that continue to push toward growth and stay rooted in instructional practice, even through challenges.

This guide starts with a focus on helping leaders think through their school environment through the lens of their students. It includes:

- Student Walk: Seeing the Environment Through a Student Lens (*page 3*)
- Coaching Considerations: Fostering Student Ownership Through a Positive Classroom Environment (*page 4-8*)
- Guidance for Structuring Strengths-Based Coaching (*page 9-10*)
- Mid-Year Reflection Guide (*page 11*)
- BINGO Card with Simple Ideas for Enhancing the School Culture (*page 12*)

While this guide was designed with the pandemic recovery in mind, it can support any school leader who is focused on creating an environment that empowers students and teachers. We know when teachers are equipped to foster student ownership and their strengths are both celebrated and shared, both school cultures and student outcomes improve.

We would welcome a conversation about what you need and what support we can provide related to this work. If you have questions or want to learn more, reach out to info@niet.org.



STUDENT WALK: SEEING THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH A STUDENT LENS

As you are considering your school environment, you may want to start by thinking through the everyday experience of your students. This perspective can help to shape your support for the fuller school community. Here is a process to consider your school culture through your students' eyes.

Choose at least two students who represent different parts of the school community. Walk through their day in your mind. Think about what experiences and interactions each student will have during their daily schedule. Don't skip over anything that may feel non-consequential, such as a passing period or dismissal. *[Bonus: Spend at least part of the day shadowing that student to observe what they see and experience in reality.]*

As you walk through the day, reflect on the values that are being modeled – both what you would view as positive and what you may not want to see. How does the overall environment reflect what you have set as a school goal or mission? How do the relationships and values being modeled for each of these students compare to the relationships and values you would like to see reflected in your students?

At the end of your walk, whether mentally or in-person, ask yourself the following questions:

- What did you learn?
- How many of your students are seeing positive models of the school environment and culture throughout their day?
- What relationships and values are being modeled in your school?
- What steps will you take as a leader to strengthen or reinforce the characteristics you want to see?

Students have a lot to teach us. If we want to create a positive environment that is inclusive of every member of the community, we can start by taking a pulse check on how our students experience their school. What you learn through doing this student walk may shape how you utilize the resources throughout this guide.

COACHING CONSIDERATIONS: FOSTERING STUDENT OWNERSHIP THROUGH A POSITIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

All educators want to create classrooms where every student is empowered to be successful. As school leaders continue to consider how to help their students overcome challenges and setbacks, focusing on the classroom environment and culture is a key step.

NIET's *Teaching and Learning Standards Rubric* includes a domain focused on the environment, with four indicators that outline what excellent teacher practice and student ownership looks like through that lens. At NIET, [student ownership is defined](#) as the stage when students can articulate and show what they are learning, why they are learning it, strategies that support their learning, and how they will use these strategies in the future – and that starts by creating a classroom where that level of learning is the expectation.

This tool shares ideas and examples to help teachers and school leaders establish what it looks and sounds like for teachers and students to build a positive and inclusive classroom culture where students take ownership for their learning, with coaching considerations for leaders to have intentional conversations with teachers before and after a lesson. It is aligned to the NIET rubric and includes descriptions of how students demonstrate ownership, how teachers can support student ownership, key markers that signal increased ownership, and guiding questions to help coaches support teachers in coaching conversations. Consider using this before your next classroom walkthrough or learning walk to support your work to create a positive school culture.

If you are looking for more resources about how to coach for student ownership around specific components of a teacher's instructional practice, [view our coaching considerations for instruction](#).



NIET RUBRIC INDICATOR

TEACHER ACTIONS

Teachers support student ownership by:

- Developing learning activities that promote student thinking and engagement.
- Providing opportunities for student reflection.
- Asking students what are you learning, how are you learning and how will you know if you have learned the content
- Engaging students in the creation of success criteria and provide opportunities for students to set personal goals based on the criteria.
- Encouraging students to self-monitor their learning and track their progress.

STUDENT ACTIONS

Students demonstrate ownership by:

- Being cognitively engaged in learning and working with the teacher to set challenging goals for their learning.
- Learning from their mistakes and articulating their thinking, what they have learned, and how they learned the content.
- Actively participating with their teacher in establishing criteria for what success looks like for this lesson/task/unit/etc.
- Striving for success based on clear criteria that has been established for the lesson.
- Striving to meet or exceed their goals.
- Reflecting on their learning according to success criteria and goals to assess their progress in learning.

POTENTIAL EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

- Students set and own their goals for learning.
- Students see errors as learning opportunities and can articulate their next steps for learning.
- Students establish and own the success criteria for the lesson and often monitor their work according to the criteria.
- Students examine exemplars and develop criteria for success with the teacher, then utilize the criteria in their own work.
- Students self-assess and reflect on their work according to the lesson's success criteria and adjust their individual goals for learning.

EXPECTATIONS

COACHING CONSIDERATIONS

BEFORE A LESSON

Talk with the teacher about how they have structured the lesson to set high expectations. Together, answer these guiding questions:

- How will the learning activities promote student thinking and engagement throughout the lesson?
- How will you engage students in co-constructing success criteria for the lesson?
 - When in the lesson will students be provided time to reflect and respond to the following questions:
 - What are you learning?
 - How are you learning?
- How will you know you have learned the content?
- How will the expectations for the lesson be communicated to students in order for them to take ownership of their learning?
- When in the lesson will students have opportunities to set goals and reflect on their goals?

AFTER A LESSON

Discuss the evidence from what you observed and heard. Walk through these guiding questions with a teacher following a walkthrough.

- From the questions we discussed before the lesson, which ones were implemented the way you envisioned? Which did not happen according to plan?
- When was an example of a moment when you differentiated instruction in order to increase equitable access to the success criteria?
- How can the leadership team help you to continue to create a classroom environment where students are able to own their learning?

NIET RUBRIC INDICATOR

TEACHER ACTIONS

STUDENT ACTIONS

POTENTIAL EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

ENGAGING STUDENTS AND MANAGING BEHAVIOR

- Teachers support student ownership by:**
- Providing resources and materials to support students with monitoring their own behaviors.
 - Understanding each student's needs and when to provide structures that support students with staying on task.
 - Brainstorming and reaching consensus with students on the class's common, clear commitments for learning and behavior.
 - Providing strategies and resources for supporting students with monitoring their engagement levels throughout the lesson.

- Students demonstrate ownership by:**
- Taking ownership for their behaviors in order to optimize their learning and time on task.
 - Working with their teacher to establish clear commitments for their learning and behavior.
 - Monitoring their own engagement and having strategies for supporting this process.

- Students monitor their own behavior and make adjustments themselves when needed.
- Students take ownership of class and individual commitments for learning and their behavior.
- Students are aware of when they are not on task and have strategies for monitoring their engagement in learning.

COACHING CONSIDERATIONS

BEFORE A LESSON

Talk with the teacher about how they have structured the lesson to engage students and manage expectations and behavior. Together, answer these guiding questions:

- What structures will be in place for students to take ownership of their behaviors in order to optimize their learning?
- In what ways will you encourage students to monitor their own engagement in the learning during the lesson?
- How will the class commitments be established, and what role will students play in establishing these commitments?

AFTER A LESSON

Discuss the evidence from what you observed and heard. Walk through these guiding questions with a teacher following a walkthrough.

- In what ways did the students uphold the class commitments to staying on task and engaging in learning?
- Was there a moment you (the teacher) differentiated your instruction to support an individual student or students with staying on task? How did you feel that went?
- What strategies did you use to help students monitor their own engagement during the lesson?
- What practices from today will you take with you into the next lesson?

NIET RUBRIC INDICATOR

TEACHER ACTIONS

STUDENT ACTIONS

POTENTIAL EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

ENVIRONMENT

Teachers support student ownership by:

- Helping students to understand how we learn from errors and taking risks.
- Developing tasks that challenge students' thinking where the support of peers is encouraged to interact with the task.
- Developing lessons and activities where student interaction is valued and encouraged.
- Collaborating with students to organize the classroom to meet their needs.
- Providing a space for students to display their work and setting aside time for students to reflect on their work to identify student work samples for display.
- Examining the classroom environment from the student perspective and encouraging students to make adjustments to their environment when appropriate.

Students demonstrate ownership by:

- Feeling safe to take risks and interact with peers.
- Attempting challenging and new things.
- Seeking help and interacting with their classmates.
- Taking on an active role in designing and organizing their classroom to support their learning.
- Having and knowing where to locate supplies, equipment, and resources readily.
- Taking ownership of selecting and displaying their own work.
- Organizing and shifting the organization of their classroom to support their learning (working individually or cooperatively with peers).

- Students take risks in their learning and support their peers with risk taking.
- Students do not shy away from challenging work and feel comfortable seeking the help of others.
- Students collaborate with others and take ownership of monitoring their learning to know when they need the support of their peers.
- Students take initiative to organize their learning environment in order for it to maximize their learning.
- Students self-assess their work to select appropriate work to display in their learning environment and feel confident in their decisions.
- Students shift and create a learning environment that maximizes their learning. (This could be working in groups, pairs or individually, etc.)

COACHING CONSIDERATIONS

BEFORE A LESSON

Talk with the teacher about how they have structured the lesson to ensure a safe and comfortable learning environment for students. Together, answer these guiding questions:

- In what ways will you communicate with students that the classroom is a safe space to take risks and learn from their errors?
- What specific moments in the lesson will encourage students to interact with one another and support each other's work?
- How will students be able to share their work with others and you?
- Are there any student interactions or pairings you are wondering about or want to talk through ahead of the lesson?
- Are there any students who you feel will not take a risk or fully engage with the lesson? How can we support them in doing so?

AFTER A LESSON

Discuss the evidence from what you observed and heard. Walk through these guiding questions with a teacher following a walkthrough.

- How did the classroom environment encourage student risk taking? Did you see some specific evidence, such as an opportunity for a student to take a risk?
- How did you encourage students to learn from their missteps during the lesson?
- How did students interact with and take ownership of the classroom environment? Was there a moment where they were able to move around and interact or adjust their environment purposefully?
- In what way did students have the opportunity to reflect on their own work and share takeaways with peers?
- Were there any moments of confusion or lost time that could prompt us to revisit classroom routines or structures?
- Is there an opportunity to display the student work publicly? If so, how will you do this?
- Where did you see evidence of students taking initiative to seek help from you or peers?
- Were there any students who we could focus on supporting more to take a risk in the next lesson?

NIET RUBRIC INDICATOR

TEACHER ACTIONS

Teachers support student ownership by:

- Modeling caring, kindness, and respect for others.
- Modeling, valuing, and celebrating the various backgrounds and cultures in the room.
- Seeking students' opinions and striving to better understand their interests.
- Developing a classroom environment that promotes positive relationships.
- Encouraging and promoting multiple opportunities for students to be interdependent.

STUDENT ACTIONS

Students demonstrate ownership by:

- Consistently demonstrating caring, kindness, and respect for one another and toward their teacher.
- Understanding their peers' backgrounds and cultures and displaying actions that demonstrate acknowledgment and value.
- Sharing their interests and opinions with their teacher and peers.
- Taking ownership of building and maintaining positive relationships and showing interdependence in the classroom.

POTENTIAL EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

- Students work together collaboratively towards a common goal, demonstrating respect towards one another.
- Student conversations demonstrate understanding and respect of each other's cultures and backgrounds.
- Students want to share their opinions and feel safe doing so with others.
- Students take initiative to develop positive relationships within the classroom without being prompted to do so.

RESPECTFUL CULTURE

COACHING CONSIDERATIONS

BEFORE A LESSON

Talk with the teacher about how they have structured the lesson to ensure a respectful classroom culture for students. Together, answer these guiding questions:

- In what ways will you seek students' opinions during the lesson in order to incorporate their interests and viewpoints?
- What moments during the lesson will encourage students to rely on each other?
- Is there one way you can celebrate or acknowledge a variety of backgrounds and cultures during the lesson?

AFTER A LESSON

Discuss the evidence from what you observed and heard. Walk through these guiding questions with a teacher following a walkthrough.

- What is an example of a moment during which you saw students interacting positively? Did they need encouragement to do this, or did they take initiative without being prompted?
- In what ways did students rely on one another during the learning?
- How were students encouraged to share their interests and opinions during the lesson?
- How did the teacher model caring, kindness, and respect for students?
- Did you hear any student conversations that demonstrated mutual understanding of individual backgrounds and cultures?

GUIDANCE FOR STRUCTURING STRENGTHS-BASED COACHING

Having a strengths-based conversation with an educator requires a deep level of listening and observing, and it centers around the goal of maximizing an educator's strengths to further their own instructional practice. It also helps the educator to be more conscious about what is working and facilitates a conversation around improvement that is rooted in their talents and strengths.

When leaders have an intentional focus on fostering a positive environment, they can still drive productive conversations about good teaching and learning. At NIET, we use strengths-based conversations with educators to support [student engagement and ownership](#) of their learning – the outcome of effective instruction. While there is no exact formula for strengths-based coaching, this document provides some guidance on how to structure and explore strengths-based coaching with an educator following a walkthrough or observation of their instruction.

IDENTIFY SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF THEIR STRENGTHS IN ACTION

Talk about what you saw in the classroom that was powerful and label effective instructional practices. Provide as many examples as you can of how the teacher took specific steps to increase student ownership and how you saw students respond and engage. Be as clear and exact as possible. For example, talk about a specific moment, what the educator said, and what specific students said or did in response.

As you share, teachers may want to focus on what they want to fix or what is going wrong. Remind them that doing something well does not happen by accident and that this is a conversation to talk about strengths. Be sure to help the teacher trace the impact of his or her actions to student actions, engagement, and ownership.

Share that understanding our strengths can help to not only strengthen a teacher's own teaching but can help us identify which strategies to try across the school, and that is important for helping to improve student achievement more broadly.

CELEBRATE PROGRESS

Acknowledge something the teacher has been working on from previous coaching sessions (e.g., a specific instructional technique, an aspect of behavior management) and how you saw them continuing to work on that skill or strategy in practice. Noting milestones and ways that teachers are leveraging their strengths builds their confidence in applying their strengths to improve.

Are you an NIET partner? View examples of strengths-based coaching and additional resources in EE PASS.

ACKNOWLEDGE PERSEVERANCE AND RESILIENCE

Acknowledge the challenges that the teacher may face, such as learning gaps or specific student needs, and the evidence you saw that students are progressing despite those challenges – thanks to the hard work of the educator. Particularly as we recover from the pandemic, acknowledging and taking note of the obstacles that teachers and students face is key to helping them feel seen and understood – and to identifying the support the educator may need.

REFLECT

Ask the teacher to reflect on what is working. Some potential questions to talk through:

- What are you doing in your teaching that is having an impact on student learning? What evidence are you noticing?
- How have you overcome challenges this year with your students?
- How did you get students to take ownership of their learning? (Cite a specific example; e.g., How did you get students to ask higher-level questions about the text they were reading?)
- How can you leverage the skill/strategy/ownership that you've taught students in your next lesson or unit? How do you think they'll respond?
- What have I said today that is powerful about your teaching? What have I said that is going to impact the way you teach moving forward?
- If you were talking with another teacher who was struggling with an area where you are strong (cite a specific example; e.g., setting high expectations), how would you coach them on where to start?
- Would you be willing to talk about this in PLC or cluster meetings?

LOOK AHEAD

Based on what you heard, share what you see as some next steps. Perhaps they could bring their strength into a collaborative meeting with other educators. You could discuss other areas of their practice that could be enhanced by strengths.

Additionally, consider how and when you can publicly acknowledge an educator's strengths with their peers or with students. That can help to further cultivate a school and staff culture that reflects the values you may want to reinforce.



MID-YEAR REFLECTION GUIDE

Leaders can continue to support teachers' morale and drive student growth by using the mid-year moment as an opportunity to step back and reflect. In this reflection and ensuing conversations, pinpoint instructional strengths you have observed this fall and make a plan to spread those practices across the building. This resource is designed to help leaders facilitate that process.

STEPS FOR STRENGTHS-BASED REFLECTION	GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS AND COACHES
<p>Step 1: Gather evidence of teacher strengths from the past semester that led to student engagement, ownership, and a positive learning experience.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you see a teacher try new instructional strategies or practices these past few months? How did you respond and reward that action? • What strategies did a teacher try to increase student engagement? Were there “wins” you could share with the broader team? • What specific actions did a teacher take that positively impacted a student's growth and learning? • How can you proactively provide positive feedback to the teacher about the observed strength(s) to encourage and build investment for a later conversation? Consider sending a quick note detailing the strength and how you observed students benefiting from their instructional move.
<p>Step 2: Decide which teacher strengths to highlight and leverage in other classrooms. Take a moment to bring attention to specific, individual teacher strengths in a public or celebratory way.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you want your school environment to look and feel like in the spring? How did you see teachers building momentum toward that vision this fall? • Is there a specific teacher strength you observed that could support an identified need in the building? • Is there a specific teacher move that might be the easiest for another teacher to observe or effectively replicate? • How can you shout out the teacher's strength in front of their peers? • How can you celebrate the teacher's practice while acknowledging their resilience and specifically pointing out obstacles they had to overcome this year?
<p>Step 3: Identify the most effective place to leverage this strength.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who else could utilize or try out the strength(s) you observed? • Who already has a positive working relationship with the teacher with the identified strength(s)? Would that teacher be willing to work with his or her peers to share more? • Who has a classroom culture that is primed for the identified strategy? • How can you utilize this process to bring your teachers closer together as a team? Consider guiding PLC/cluster conversations around an identified strength and allowing teachers to share additional feedback.
<p>Step 4: Develop a plan for transferring the strategy across classrooms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What structures are already in place that allow teachers to collaborate? • Which leadership team member(s) is the best fit to guide this process? • Which process for transfer is most appropriate in this situation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Co-planning, observation, and debrief — Collaborative planning with grade level/department — Analysis of impact of the teacher strategy on student work — Recorded lesson segment shared as a model in PLCs/cluster
<p>Step 5: Determine areas of focus and a strategy to check-in on progress.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the identified strengths across the school, how will you select which areas to target and focus on in the upcoming semester? How will you communicate that with educators? • What supports will teachers need to scale the transfer of this learning into their classrooms? How will their progress be monitored? • How can you collaborate to implement the plan and make refinements? • How will you follow up to ensure teachers feel supported? • How will you define success? • How will you celebrate success, individually and publicly?

BINGO CARD

One of the main aspects of a positive school environment is ensuring that teachers and students are valued, heard, and a part of the school's mission and vision. This BINGO card is designed to help provide simple ideas to do this for both leaders and teachers.

As a leader, consider using this tool to bring your educators together for a fun challenge, or simply as a catalyst for your own positive leadership practices throughout the week. If you ask staff members to compete and see how many of these positive actions they can take toward facilitating a stronger school culture, make sure to take it a step further and recognize and reward winners intentionally.

Elevating a Positive School Environment BINGO

Collect positive feedback from a parent to share with a teacher	Pair two teachers up to co-plan, leading with a specific strength you observed	Ask a student to articulate something they're learning right now	Highlight a student publicly for demonstrating a positive character trait	Reach out to a parent to share positive feedback about their student
Support students at a sporting or other extra-curricular event	Ask students to share a favorite activity they did this week and ideas for improving it	Remind students and staff of the school's mission/vision publicly	Take over a teacher's "duty" for the day (lunch duty, hall duty)	Ask a teacher about a strong instructional moment from the day
Display or share exemplar student work publicly	Shout out a student or teacher accomplishment on social media	Educator's Choice	Share an empowering quote during morning announcements	Encourage a student to write a thank you note for a teacher
Ask a teacher to name something they're doing to impact student learning	Tell a student when you see them take ownership of their learning	Ask a teacher to share a planned strategy for an upcoming lesson	Highlight an instructional strength you saw during a PLC or cluster	Ask a student about a positive moment from the week
Write a thank you note to a student	Go on a learning walk and take note of a positive interaction you saw	Share a moment of character you observed from a teacher or student	Celebrate the contribution of a non-instructional staff member (e.g., bus driver, custodian)	Praise a student for taking a productive risk