



Blackstone Academy Charter School

Raising Expectations for the Classroom Learning Environment

At Blackstone Academy Charter School, a high school in Pawtucket, RI, teachers were proud of the learning environment they had created – and also knew that it could be even stronger. Head of School Kyleen Carpenter collaborated with teachers to shift classroom environments in ways that would engage teenagers and set high behavioral expectations throughout the school. To make these changes as successful and seamless as possible, Carpenter worked with staff to determine areas for improvement, to select and implement new classroom techniques, and to explain changes to students in authentic ways.

1) KNOW WHERE YOU ARE—AND WHERE YOU WANT TO BE

“The staff here, we’re high achieving – we’re always looking for what we can do next to make our school better.” Teachers especially wanted higher classroom expectations to support them in engaging all students.

To focus the staff discussion around selecting new learning expectations, Head of School Carpenter assigned Doug Lemov’s book [Teach Like a Champion](#) as summer reading and asked each teacher to select three practices that could be implemented throughout the school. Teachers were also expected to identify three changes they personally wanted to implement in their own classrooms. Rather than using *Teach Like a Champion* to provide prescriptive answers, Carpenter treated the book as a high-quality resource to facilitate discussion. The *Teach Like a Champion* summer book club became the launching point for a larger staff conversation around school expectations and practices.

Resource: [Teach Like a Champion summer book club guide](#)

2) AGREE UPON SCHOOL-WIDE STRATEGIES

Using a democratic process to select learning environment changes made the new techniques easier to implement during the school year. When Blackstone teachers returned for summer orientation, they split into small groups to narrow their choices and discuss the practices from the book. Then, the staff came together to select the three new techniques for school-wide implementation. Carpenter asked teachers to 1) seek techniques that directly addressed the school’s current classroom concerns and 2) select techniques that every teacher in the school could easily implement.

Limiting changes to three new strategies allowed the staff to focus their efforts. For the three school-wide practices, teachers at Blackstone selected Lemov’s techniques of S.L.A.N.T., Seat Signals, and a hybrid combination of Cold Call and No Opt-Out. S.L.A.N.T. creates an expectation for students to “Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod, and Track the speaker,” while Seat Signals provide a school-wide sign language for students to signal needs from their seats – such as a pencil or bathroom break. The Blackstone combination of Cold Call and No Opt-Out sets an expectation that any student must be ready to answer teachers’ questions, and will have multiple opportunities to answer correctly and participate.

Resource: [Discussion guide, agenda, and notes for selecting new techniques](#)

Resource: [Teach Like a Champion Cold-Call classroom video](#)

3) IMPLEMENT CHANGE CONSISTENTLY

After staff agreed upon the new techniques, Carpenter expected their daily use in every classroom. She supported teachers as they learned the new practices, modeled the techniques, and explained that school-wide implementation was non-negotiable. For Carpenter, this consistency is the key to the success of the new practices – “the reason the three techniques work is that everyone is doing them.”

Resource: [Blackstone Classroom Expectations](#) // Resource: [Classroom observation notes](#)

4) INTRODUCE CHANGES TO STUDENTS

“If you’re going to tell a teenager to do something, you need to have a darn good reason for the rule,” Carpenter explains with a laugh. To communicate changes to students, she worked with teachers to create classroom posters and lesson plans to introduce the new expectations in appealing ways. Teachers discussed how the changes would benefit students with a focus on life-long skills essential for success. For example, practicing Lemov’s S.L.A.N.T. technique will help students to focus in class and to succeed in future interviews and professional environments.

Resource: [Classroom Expectations Posters](#) // Resource: [Blackstone Student Handbook](#)