

How to Help Middle School Students Learn to Work Independently

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Teaching Strategies

These students can navigate a self-paced class with lots of teacher support at the beginning and clear expectations about assignments.

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We know that students are joining virtual classes in all kinds of different situations. Some students have their work-from-home parents closely monitoring their schoolwork. Other students are babysitting three cousins while their parents are at work. It can feel impossible to move at a pace that works for all students. So why not let them set their own pace?

Last school year, I rolled out a self-pacing model in my seventh-grade math class. Within each unit, students would work through the content at their own pace with video instruction. It seemed like my class would largely teach itself while I spent most of my class time engaging with students who needed support.

But about two months into self-pacing last year, I was ready to give up. Most students liked the model, but most of them were also treating my class like it was free time. Only a few students were learning a lot, and their circumstances were what stopped me from giving up on self-pacing altogether. The student who wanted to do everything her own way finally could. The student who was labeled as disruptive because he couldn't sit still could finally take energy breaks whenever he needed to.

They showed me that self-pacing could work for middle school students, and I spent the rest of the year helping my students figure out how to succeed in a self-paced classroom.

Introduce Self-Pacing Gradually

I began by showing students how a self-paced class works in a four-lesson introduction. Then I started the first unit (eight lessons in five weeks) and pretty much stepped back and watched. That was a really unfair amount of responsibility to put on a seventh grader, and most of them struggled.

In our second unit, I reset the expectations around self-pacing. We started by self-pacing within a single class: Everyone needed to complete the lesson during class, but how they got there was up to them. If you want to take half the class on the five-minute video? Go for it. You're still getting an exit ticket at the end of class like everybody else. This dramatically improved the amount of engagement in the model. Students felt a sense of urgency and could focus on completing one lesson rather than eight.

During distance learning this fall, I'm rolling out self-pacing in much the same way. We're starting with choices ("Do you want to work with me or watch this video?"), then moving to schedules, and eventually I'll let students self-pace two or three lessons after we've mastered the basics.

Self-Pacing Is a Set of Skills

Once I had a lot more students on the self-pacing bus last year, I needed to get them moving forward by teaching them some basics that I'd neglected in my course introduction. I was surprised to find that a lot of middle school students don't know how to engage with instructional videos. Often, they forget to write things down or take notes. They also don't always take advantage of the benefits of video instruction—pausing, rewatching, or googling something they don't understand. These were skills that we worked on throughout the year and are featured prominently alongside culture-building activities in my beginning-of-year lessons.

But I also found that stronger class routines can support the development of these skills. Even if a student knows how to watch a math video, they will still get stuck if they don't know when to watch it. That's why starting the year with a

schedule or routine is so important. Once we got the routine down, the learning really started happening.

Completing Isn't the Same as Learning

Any teacher can tell you that just because a seventh grader does something quickly doesn't mean they did it well. Once my students were progressing well with self-pacing, my next task was to set up some speed bumps. Their daily exit-ticket performance had improved a lot, but their end-of-unit test scores didn't reflect that. Students were moving through the content so fast that they didn't have time to digest any of it. The students and I were more focused on completing lessons than actually learning the content.

So I stopped focusing on keeping up with students and started focusing on depth of understanding. I built in a challenge activity for each lesson that really pushed students to apply their understanding of a concept. Time for extension can double as time for reteach and review for students who need to reengage with concepts and further develop their understanding of them.

This fall, I'm hoping to get all of my students to a place where they can self-pace, but I'm still going to try to keep everybody in the same general part of each unit with more intentional extensions and reviews.

Some Middle School Students Aren't Ready for Self-Pacing

By last March, many of my students were ready for self-pacing. Then Covid-19 happened. When I transitioned to distance learning, these students succeeded with very little extra support from me. They had the skills, practice, and motivation to engage in the work I was posting online. There were a few students who hardly ever made it to a Zoom call. But they still got their work done, emailed me questions as needed, and had a solid fourth quarter in math.

There were also students, though, who weren't ready for self-pacing. For them, I made math class feel as much like a traditional classroom as I could. This was possible only because enough of my students had gotten on the self-pacing bus and were moving forward, largely independently, at a good speed for learning.

After a mixed year with self-pacing, I'm confident that it can be a powerful learning tool for middle school students in a distance learning environment when applied flexibly and gradually. By the end of the first term, I expect the majority

of my students to feel comfortable and even embrace the challenge of a self-paced classroom.