Top 5 tips

Engaging students who fall far below or far above grade level

Tip 1: Relationships
Before a student can engage in learning in your classroom, he or she must feel comfortable and WANT to engage. The first step is building a strong and trusting relationship with your students. Be excited to be their teacher and be excited to teach. Develop a classroom that is a safe, nurturing environment for everyone by showing genuine care for your students, both personally and academically. Understand that students who are below grade level may have negative preconceived notions about learning and may avoid forming relationships with teachers or other students due to their academic struggles and past failures. Teachers of students above grade level often must earn the respect of these high-achieving students before relationships can be formed.

Tip 2: Structure
Routines and strategies must be implemented to maintain order and structure so that active instruction can take place and students can engage in learning. There is a misconception that strong classroom management must be in place so that students will behave and, therefore, engage in learning. Although classroom management is essential to student learning, management techniques should be embedded in lessons as part of the learning experience, not separate from it. Students who are below grade level need structure for support to stay on-task and engaged. Students above grade level often lose interest in subject material they already understand.

Tip 3: Relevance
“Why do I have to learn this? I’m never going to use it in my life.” We have all heard students say this, and they say this with just cause. We teachers are charged with not only teaching our students, but also letting them know why we teach them the things we do. And students have the right to know. Teachers should always provide learning goals and expectations. Students need to be told what they will be learning, what you expect them to learn and how you will measure if they have learned what was taught. This is especially true with students below grade level and students above grade level. Students below grade level who do not see relevance in subject matter that they struggle with might immediately disengage. Students above grade level must also understand the relevance of the subject matter they are learning, but they should also be encouraged to accelerate and go deeper with the subject matter they are learning.
Tip 4: Fun
Simply put, if students are not enjoying your lesson, it will only be a matter of minutes before they disengage. This makes them perfectly normal! All people, no matter what age, like to do things that are fun and avoid things that are not fun. It needs to be formally acknowledged that learning is fun! All students, those who struggle and those who excel, love to learn and feel good about themselves when they learn something new. If your lessons are dull, regardless of the importance of the subject matter, students will not engage. Add variety, novelty, humor, collaboration, research and exploration to your lessons. Change the setting, the pace and the ways you teach and assess. And incorporate differentiation into your lessons. Any activity, including learning, is not fun when it is too easy or too hard. When it’s too easy, students will become bored and then find something else to entertain themselves. If it’s too hard, students will get frustrated and simply give up. Use the Goldilocks Rule: your instruction needs to be “just right” for each of your students.

Tip 5: Trapdoors to avoid
If students are not actively engaged in the learning process, they are simply not learning. Although there are innumerable ways to engage students, there are just as many reasons students may disengage from a lesson. Often, identifying the reason why a student disengages can lead to implementing effective strategies to reengage them in the learning process.

• **Below-Grade-Level Students**
  o Often do not like school
  o See themselves as failures
  o Do not see school as a feel-good experience
  o May feel that even when they try, they fail
  o Believe that engaging in the lesson makes them stand out to their peers
  o May come from a home in which education and learning are not valued

• **Above-Grade-Level Students**
  o Often already know the subject matter being taught
  o Get bored
  o Take over the class, disengage or challenge authority
  o Master new material so quickly they get frustrated by slower peers