

WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING...

Mitch Weathers' book is the perfect combination of school-site anecdotes, research-based practices, and personal reflections. As an author of time-management books for teachers (and the mom of four kids myself!), I was quite literally riveted learning about the differences between agendas and planners, and I found myself reconsidering some of my former teaching routines. This text is a valuable resource of ideas, activities, and templates you can put into practice the very next day.

—**Maia Heyck-Merlin**, Author of *The Together Teacher*, *The Together Leader*, and *The Together Teammate*, and CEO and Founder of The Together Group

In Executive Functions for Every Classroom, Mitch Weathers makes the case for universal classroom routines that free up students' mental bandwidth to focus on learning. Rather than struggle through the day trying to navigate different expectations in every classroom, students can rely on predictable structures for starting and ending every class, organizing their work, and keeping track of their progress. Today's students are struggling with motivation and self-discipline. Ignoring fads and hype, this book outlines simple processes every school can put in place to get students to believe in themselves and develop the habits they'll need for success in school and in life. It will become an instant classic and will transform the learning and trajectory of generations of students.

—**Justin Baeder**, Director of the Principal Center

Full of simple, doable actions and clear, engaging examples to bring ideas to life, this book is an essential friend that will bring clarity and organization into your classroom.

—**Becky Carlzon**, Author of *Powering Up Children* and Designer of Learning Pioneers and PressPlay

I'm not exaggerating when I say that this is a must-read for every single teacher on the planet! Weathers provides actionable yet realistic steps for teachers to take to consistently create more predictable learning spaces for

all students. This work has a profound impact on all students, but chaos navigators, in particular, benefit. Chaos navigators are our young people who are giving everything they have just to survive the lack of predictability they experience every moment outside of school. When teachers commit to the strategies outlined in this book, they create havens for students, moments in their day that are safer, and that makes all the difference. Our chaos navigators are more likely to lean into their education and take the risks inherent to learning if they are in classrooms like those described in this book. Thank you for this absolute gift, Mitch!

—**Jaz Ampaw-Farr**, Human-First CEO,
Keynote Speaker, and Resilience Ninja, Be
Human First Ltd

Classroom teachers know they are teaching content and they do it well. Yet, more importantly, they are teaching their students how to learn and that takes executive functioning. Weathers' book provides research-backed, immediately applicable strategies to support the development of executive functioning in one's classroom context. It's beyond helpful whether you finish feeling validated, gain good reminders, or experience new learning. It's worth the read.

—**Jennifer Abrams**, Author of *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work and Having Hard Conversations*

This book is a masterclass on how to create a predictable learning routine that guarantees your students' success. Mitch Weathers is my go-to executive functions expert, and he's shared what works with you here.

—**Danny Bauer**, Founder of Better
Leaders Better Schools

Executive Functions for Every Classroom is an indispensable and powerful guide that addresses the critical issue of disengagement and dysfunction and offers practical solutions to foster self-regulation and academic success in students. Weathers systematically breaks down the challenges students face each day while providing insightful strategies, real-life examples, and actionable advice to help educators and parents empower students with essential executive functioning skills. With a deep understanding of the hurdles students encounter and a wealth of resources for improvement, this book equips readers with the tools necessary to cultivate executive functions in students, ultimately transforming their

educational experience and setting them on a path to outstanding achievement.

—**Joshua Stamper**, Author, Podcaster,
and Training and Development Specialist
for the Teach Better Team

Executive functions are the invisible gears that we all need to be successful. When we neglect to teach them explicitly and with modeling, our students suffer disengagement and inequity. This book is the essential guide for teachers hoping to make learning more equitable, engaging, and enlightening!

—**Ariel Curry**, Author of *Hungry Authors: A Simple Guide to Planning, Creating, and Publishing a Nonfiction Book*

Executive functioning has been shown to be one of the characteristics that helps young people grow into great leaders, and this world needs more effective leaders in every arena. Through clear language and powerful stories, Mitch Weathers shares strategies and simple solutions to help teach this critical skill in every classroom.

—**Jethro Jones**, Founder, Transformative Principal

In Executive Functions for Every Classroom, Mitch Weathers brilliantly breaks down what executive functions are, why they are critical to our students' success, and how to teach them in any setting. With this book, our students will achieve in school and in life. There is wisdom on every page!

—**Alex Kajitani**, Speaker, Author, and
California Teacher of the Year; Top-4 Finalist,
National Teacher of the Year

We've needed a book like this for a long time. If students are without executive functioning skills, almost nothing else that we do matters. I recommend that this book becomes a prerequisite in every teacher and school leader prep program.

—**T.J. Vari**, Co-Founder of The
Schoolhouse 302, Author, School Leader,
and Book Nerd

We often hear about goals to foster students who are lifelong learners, and Weathers has outlined a systematic, logical, and easy-to-implement structure for maximizing students' executive function. His Daily Routine teaches students how

to be organized, avoids overtaxing their cognitive loads, and reduces the time and effort required for teachers to plan. Every educator who wants their students to be actively engaged in the process of learning, focus their attention on academic goals, and have the skills to be successful should read Executive Functions for Every Classroom.

—**Connie Hamilton**, Author, Educator,
Speaker, and Presenter

Written with empathy for both teachers and students, this book is a must-read for all educators! Practical strategies based on solid research equip teachers with exactly what they need to help students boost their executive functioning, which is perhaps the most important life skill today.

—**Julie Stern**, Four-Time Best-Selling
Author and Founder of
www.edtochangetheworld.com

Drawing upon a plethora of research and rich practical experiences, Mitch Weathers reveals a unique and proven framework to improve student learning. Executive Functions for Every Classroom is replete with the tools and strategies students and teachers need to experience daily success. Ideal for both new and experienced teachers, Executive Functions for Every Classroom offers a proven pathway to a calm, purposeful, and joyful learning environment.

—**Aubrey Patterson**, CEO Warm
Demanders Inc, Superintendent (retired)
Alberta, Canada

Executive Functions for Every Classroom, Grades 3-12

**Creating Safe and Predictable
Learning Environments**

For Amber. Thank you for your unwavering belief in me.

Executive Functions for Every Classroom, Grades 3-12

Creating Safe and Predictable
Learning Environments

Mitch Weathers



For information:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
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SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
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SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
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India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
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China Square Central
Singapore 048423

Vice President and Editorial Director:

Monica Eckman
Publisher: Jessica Allan
Content Development Editor:
Mia Rodriguez
Production Editor: Vijayakumar
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Proofreader: Girish Kumar Sharma
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PREFACE

I'd like to share what I have learned from the past two decades of working with students. The truth is, I am a teacher, not a researcher, but ever since my early years in the classroom, I have been obsessed with translating the theory I was learning in books and research articles into concrete, actionable steps for teachers and students in the modern classroom. Too often, following professional development that I attended as a teacher, I was left with what felt like even more work to do to incorporate the ideas into my practice. To solve this problem, you will find an emphasis on practice, or action, in this book. My goal is to equip teachers with a proven method for teaching their students executive functioning skills within the context of their grade level or subject matter while engaging families in a unique fashion.

To that end, the word I encourage you to keep in mind as you read these pages is *coherency*. If you are like me, you have read a lot of books and articles that detail strategies for teachers. And although most, if not all, of those strategies are effective and help teachers and students experience more success, it can be difficult to see how those strategies are connected, let alone apply them together. And although teachers can pick a single strategy to try with their students, my hope is that you see the cohesion of these strategies, and that when implemented together as a routine, they serve to amplify their impact.

More than anything, this book is a call to action for all educators, parents, and even students. We can no longer leave the development of executive functioning skills up to chance. These skills and habits literally lay the foundation for learning. I have never met a teacher, school leader, or parent who does not want their students to hone executive functions, yet historically these skills have not been taught. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, before we go any further, let's begin by defining these skills. **Executive functions** are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. What you will discover in the coming pages are three keys to teaching executive functioning skills: **clarity**, **routine**, and **modeling**.

Although there is an emphasis on practice, the ideas outlined in this book are rooted in research and data. When I first developed these strategies to teach executive functions in my classroom, there was a spark. Students who were mired in academic struggle began to experience success, and those who had not struggled experienced even more success. Since that time, I have had the honor of supporting schools around the United States and internationally to implement these strategies with their students, with the same results. I have spent the last 20 years immersing myself in educational research to discover why this approach has such a profound impact on students and teachers. As such, this body of knowledge is “research-backed” as opposed to “research-based.”

Another conviction of mine is that I believe deeply that content and curricula, what we teach students, is secondary. What is primary, or foundational, is developing the capacity for learning in students and that is accomplished through teaching executive functioning skills. That is not to suggest that what we are teaching is not important—it is, of course—but without the bedrock upon which we can build knowledge, standards, and objectives fall flat.

That is why this approach to teaching executive functions is for *all* students; it is a true Universal Tier 1 RTI/MTSS intervention or resource for schools. Therefore, the intended setting for implementation is in the general education classroom to be sure all students have access.

This approach to teaching executive functions is for all students; it is a true Universal Tier 1 RTI/MTSS intervention or resource for schools.

I would like to introduce you to a few other terms before we jump in. First, I will refer to portfolios throughout each chapter. With that said, if you know me, you know I have an affinity for 3-ring binders. If students have access to a binder, this is the portfolio I recommend. The Child Mind Institute agrees, “Binders beat notebooks when it comes to making sure papers stay put. Kids with EF issues should have a dedicated binder for each subject, so they won’t have to rifle madly through everything to find their math homework (Jacobson, 2023).” **Portfolios** can be a notebook, a composition book, a three-ring binder, anything a teacher and their students have access to. I will also reference the **class sample portfolio**, a tool that teachers can use to model these skills and habits. The class sample is basically exactly what students will use each day as they participate in the daily routine. Teachers simply update the class sample to model for students how their portfolio should look. This is particularly helpful for students who are absent and need to update their portfolio.

As we ease out of the pandemic and back to regular schooling, there has never been a more critical time to teach executive functions. My hope is that the pages in this book not only articulate these strategies well, that they inspire and challenge you, but also that they bring you hope as an educator.

Your partner in bettering education,
Mitch

FOREWORD

In this important book, teachers are urged to ask students to think about their learning according to the following Likert scale. However, I would like you to ponder the Likert scale and ask yourself this question: Executive Functions: Where are you on the scale of “Getting It?”

Where Are You on the Scale of “Getting It”?				
1	2	3	4	5
I am totally confused	I am somewhat confused	I am close to “getting it” but not there yet	I am somewhat sure I “get it”	I am confident I “get it”

The good news, whether you are a 1 or a 5 or in between, is that this book will take you from definitions of executive functions to critical thinking to being able to incorporate the strategies for the necessary daily routines that allow our students to soar. Let’s begin our dive.

I like to think my executive function skills have assisted me in navigating life. My working memory is adequate, my

organizational skills keep me from missing deadlines, and my self-control, to be honest, could use more work. Most of my skills have been learned through trial and error. What if, as a young student, my lessons had included the clarity, modeling, and routines of the practical skills needed for life? How might I have navigated life more easily? Looking forward, how might today's students benefit?

As a veteran middle school teacher, it is easy for me to conjure up images of lockers that won't close because contents are spilling out into the hallway. Add to the picture the students who literally run into class late because they had been searching for an assignment in an overstuffed binder which was of no use. In my teachers' education classes and training, this topic of organization (including executive functions) was never covered. Instead, our on-the-job training consisted of working with the students over lunch or after school to clean out lockers and reorganize binders. We did this on a regular basis, rarely seeing progress. The organization problems followed these students throughout their middle school years and beyond. After reading this book, I realized that becoming organized was not just for the disorganized. As a teacher, I was intentional and purposeful, but on a regular basis? Every single one of my students would have benefited by my being clear, modeling tasks, and having established routines, daily.

Teaching is an intense profession. Teachers are leaving the field in record numbers. However, *this* is the very time I wish I could have started my career. Research is our friend, and we now know so much more about learning. Previously prevalent myths (left brain/right brain, learning styles, studying by re-reading notes or the chapter) have been debunked in favor of methods based upon robust research that we *know* increase learning and knowledge retention. Evidence-informed strategies help replace those "professional development fads" with skills and strategies on how best to help our students learn.

Every teacher needs to have in their powerful toolbox not only how best to help our students learn, but also how best to help organize that learning. Understanding executive functioning and the role it plays in organization is key. Enter Mitch Weathers. Mitch not only explains the concept but shows us the strategies that lead to success. Valuable vignettes bring the stories of success home with the experiences of real stories, real students, and real teachers. In addition, I appreciate the

reflections at the conclusion of each chapter. These are not only advantageous for book studies, but they also help me retrieve the information and link it to memory.

Clarity. Modeling. Routine. These are three keys for helping our students achieve success. As Weathers states, “Executive functions, which promote a sense of agency and dexterity in students, should be addressed daily, in every classroom. They create the foundation upon which learning occurs. Yet, historically, developing these skills has been left up to chance.” Thanks to this book, we are given the tools and strategies that enable us to leave nothing to chance, but rather show us the roadmap for organization and student success.

Imagine with me a school where every teacher clearly communicates their set expectations, models the skills needed for success, and establishes routines common to all. As Mitch states, “it is critical that this work around executive functions is made available for all students, a true Tier 1 initiative that a school undertakes.” Think of how growing up with this type of knowledge and experience would be advantageous to vocational, college, and future employment. The information is at our fingertips.

On the other hand, the author made a statement that stopped me in my tracks: “As teachers, if we are aware that our students are partially organized, and we do nothing about it, then we are complicit in their failure.” Ponder that for a moment. This information *is* now available and it is our duty to fill our toolboxes with the knowledge and strategies that enable student success. Maya Angelou said, “When we know better, we do better.” I thank Mitch Weathers, who has enlightened us and showed us how to do better.

Patrice M. Bain, Ed.S.

Co-Author: Organizing Instruction and Study to Improve Student Learning

Powerful Teaching: Unleash the Science of Learning

Author: A Parent’s Guide to Powerful Teaching

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First and foremost, I want to acknowledge my parents for their steadfast support. One will never find more giving and selfless humans. I am fortunate to be your son. Please don't take offense to the story I share at the beginning of Chapter 5.

I want to thank all the teachers and schools around the US and internationally who see the value in teaching executive functions and have embraced me and this work over the past 20 years. It truly has been an honor to collaborate with you.

In particular, I want to thank my mentor, friend, and guide in life and work, Dick Davis, the former principal of the school that coined the term “studentness” while implementing Organized Binder. Thank you for your belief in my work and for always modeling for me what it means to be husband and dad of two daughters while remaining passionate about trying to make the world a better and more just place through education.

Bert Bower, thank you! There is no question that this book would have never been written, nor would Organized Binder be thriving and working with schools around the world, without your consistent mentorship over the past decade. You are a gracious human, Bert, always giving and offering to help. Thanks for putting the bug in my ear all those years ago to write a book!

To my dear friend, Danny Bauer, of Better Leaders Better School, who believes we can do education better and is doing something about it. Thank you for always pushing me, supporting me, and believing in my mission to bring executive functions to every classroom, and continuing to nag me to write a book all these years.

Peter Thomsen, the most creative person I know, thank you for being my comrade in all things Organized Binder since the beginning. Everything that teachers and students use each day in classrooms around the globe is a manifestation of your creative genius.

Nick Muys, thank you for stopping by my classroom nearly 20 years ago to learn about this *binder* that students were talking about. Had you not stopped by that day, I am not sure Organized Binder would have ever moved beyond the walls of my classroom.

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Hacienda Heights, California

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mitch Weathers is a teacher and founder of Organized Binder, Inc. Together with the Organized Binder team, Mitch works with K–12 schools and colleges in the United States and internationally to equip students with executive functioning skills. When he is not working with schools, you can find him running trails training for his next ultramarathon. He and his wife, Amber, live in Northern California with their two daughters, Vivienne and Olive. Mitch invites you to visit organizedbinder.com to access additional resources for teaching executive functions and to learn more about the strategies outlined in this book.

EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION AND DISENGAGEMENT

CHAPTER 1

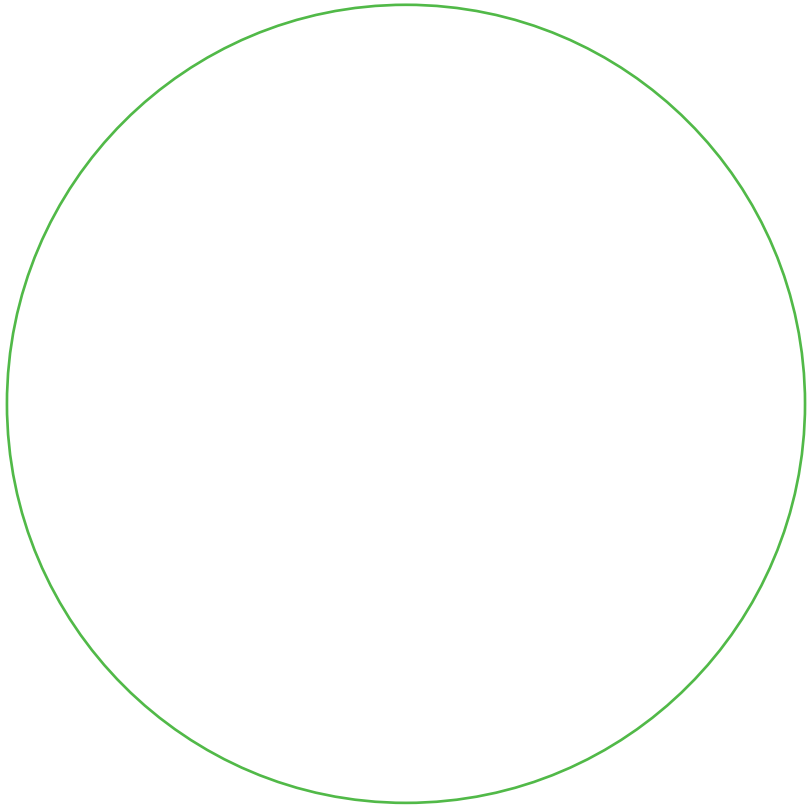
Whenever I get the opportunity to speak to educators, I start with a simple question. Before I pose the question, I encourage the audience to take out two pieces of blank paper from the packet they received before my talk. I would like you to take a moment to do the same:

“What has the greatest impact on student learning and achievement?”

Go with your “lizard brain” here and don’t overthink your responses; just write anything that comes to mind. This is a “no-stakes” activity. There are no wrong answers and you will not be graded on this assignment! ●

Your Response:

Once you have recorded everything you can think of, in the circle below, write any ideas that can be influenced by a teacher from “within” the classroom inside the circle. Those that cannot meaningfully be addressed from within the class, record on the outside of the circle.



What do you notice?

You may have listed things like:

- Relationships with students
- Consistent learning routines
- Organization
- Teaching academic habits like notetaking/study skills
- Family engagement
- Smiling
- Greeting students

Here is a list of phrases that usually don't make the inside of the circle:

- Standardized testing or assessments

- Content standards, curriculum, or textbooks
- Technology (outside of specific assistive technologies)

Think about that for a moment.

This exercise is meant to help teachers get laser focused on what they can do from within their sphere of influence to establish a more sustainable teaching practice. Too often, teachers find themselves overextended. One of the major culprits is that teachers are working to help solve problems that might be better addressed by a counselor, administrator, parent, after-school program, or maybe just taken care of at another time, not during class time.

While a significant amount of resources are allocated for testing, curriculum, and technology, and each, of course, has its purpose and merit in education, in and of themselves, these factors do not serve to establish the foundation *for* learning and overall student success.

Instead, it is executive functioning skills that build a strong foundation for learning! As students hone their executive functions, they are far more likely to score better on assessments, dive deeper into the curriculum, and wield technology to further their learning.

Executive functions, which promote a sense of agency and dexterity in students, should be addressed daily, in every classroom. They create the foundation upon which learning occurs. Yet, historically, developing these skills has been left up to chance.

When executive functioning skills are overlooked, or when students never get the opportunity to practice them in the first place, they are less likely to succeed academically, as well as in life after their K-12 schooling (Meltzer, 2010).

We cannot afford to leave this up to chance any longer.

Struggling With “Studentness”

Challenges with executive functioning, or executive dysfunction, if detected at all, typically first become apparent in the early elementary grades (Kusnyer & Stanberry, 2013). Detection can be difficult because there are no simple tests to measure a student’s executive functioning level.

If left unaddressed, students struggling with executive dysfunction slowly fall further behind their classmates (Cooper-Khan & Dietzel, 2008). Mark Katz explains, “With training and practice, children can learn to master memory, organizational, and other strategies that will serve to make them more independent learners and also help to level their academic playing field” (Katz, 2011).

Sadly, the opposite is also true. If developing executive functions makes for more independent learners, then it is likely that those who have weak executive functions will be less independent and less able to focus and engage (Gathercole et al., 2004). The reason for this is a lack of “studentness,” all the “things” students need to be able to do to successfully engage in their learning—such as executive functions.

Learners who lack a sense of studentness are unclear from the start on how to engage in the learning process with agency. Over time, this dynamic becomes the norm for these students. Often, they experience their learning passively, as if the process is unfolding around them without their active involvement.

Many of these students spend more of their mental calories just trying to keep up with their classmates, which results in fatigue their peers are not experiencing.

In the classroom, this manifests as disinterest or disengagement—but that is not the root cause. One root cause of disengagement is often executive dysfunction. If students lack the skills to engage, be independent, and experience success, if they are unable to join in with the learning community, they are far more likely to give up or opt-out.

Students who are exhibiting off-task or distracting behaviors are doing so because they lack the agency to jump into the process. These students are not *actually* disinterested. Rather, they are secretly or privately confused and perplexed by how to change things for the better.

The good news is that with training and practice students can improve their executive functioning skills (Katz, 2011). By explicitly teaching these skills, we unlock students’ potential and give them the opportunity to authentically engage in their learning.

There are several reasons why challenges with executive functioning is so commonplace; let's unpack them.

Problematic Transitions and Increased Expectations

As students progress through their K-12 journey, schoolwork gets more challenging and complex. At the same time, students are experiencing greater pressure and expectations from teachers to become more independent learners. However, this increased expectation is seldom articulated or forewarned.

For example, when a student transitions to their last grade of elementary school, typically 5th or 6th grade, their world shifts on its axis. Seemingly overnight, everyone is talking about middle school. Students might think, *"Wait, but I am still in 5th grade at my elementary school! I don't have to go to middle school for an entire year!"*

Now all students hear is that they better be prepared. There will be lockers, "big" kids, and students no longer have the comfort of being with one teacher all day who really knows them and loves them. They will have to figure out how to navigate seven *different* classes, with *different* expectations, *different* teachers, *different* routines, and *different* content. Leading up to this last year of elementary school, a student's only worry was to get used to a new teacher and classroom each school year.

This is a seismic shift that is rarely addressed and for most students (read: all), this is scary!

The data tell the story of these quantum leaps that are fraught with problems for most students. It is common when making the transition from elementary school to middle school, as well as the 9th grade transition to high school, for many learners to experience a decrease in motivation, engagement, and grades (Eccles et al., 1993; Roderick et al., 2013; West et al., 2016). Data like these are startling as these drops are not the result of a student's challenges in a specific subject area or discipline. Something broader is at play here: a lack of preparedness to engage in the rigors of the next step of their education journey. This is where executive functions can set students up for success and bridge these transitions!

Lack of Explicit Modeling

Developing executive functioning skills has largely been left up to chance in the past because they actually are not *taught*, in the traditional sense. As mentioned in the Introduction, executive functions are best learned when students see them modeled and are given daily opportunities to practice them in a no-stakes environment. This is why curricula that promise to teach students these skills and habits typically fall flat. Only complicating the issue is that teachers don't have the time to fit these topics into their lessons; they already have content and standards to teach and not enough time to adequately accomplish that task. Therefore, many schools opt to embed this work into support or advisory classes which students often perceive as not a "real" class.

The way to avoid these pitfalls is to embed modeling and student practice of executive functions directly into the learning routine of any (ideally all) class(es). By doing so, teachers can rest assured that their students will develop the skills and habits they need to succeed, regardless of what they are learning, while making certain that they do not lose instruction time. We'll talk through how to do this in the chapters ahead.

Stress From Chaos Outside of School

For many students, life outside of school is chaotic and unpredictable. It makes sense then, that some of these students might exhibit similar behaviors at school; it's all they know. My friend Jaz Ampaw-Farr refers to these young people as "chaos navigators"—young people who have grown accustomed to life without consistency or predictability.

If you are like me, you can list a number of "chaotic" things students have shared with you that they live with and which impact their schooling. I know students who have faced routine hunger, poor nutrition, and drive-by shootings (where the understood directive was to grab your younger siblings and get in the bathtub). Other students I have known navigated violence, poverty, homelessness, loneliness, isolation, high levels of stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and loss. The list goes on and on.

Young people with these lived experiences have grown accustomed to existing in a constant, low-level state of "fight-or-flight."

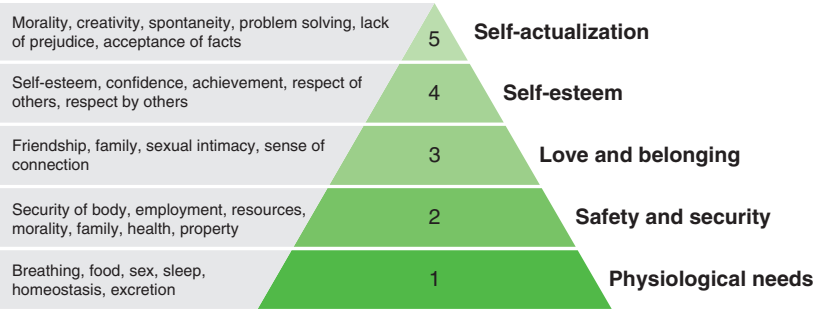
Kind of like dealing with a nagging stress that won’t subside—it is just always there, so you get used to it. Our stress response, which evolved to save our lives if we were faced with danger, was meant to happen in short bursts, not in a sustained fashion over time. When this occurs, the stress interrupts the development of executive functioning skills. Paul Tough in *How Children Succeed* states, “It wasn’t poverty itself that was compromising the executive function abilities of the poor kids. It was the stress that went along with it” (Tough, 2012).

From my experience, we can replace “poverty” with any of the other systemic causes: lack of safety, hunger, experiencing homelessness, uncertainty related to the pandemic, etc. If we follow Tough’s logic, it is not the systemic cause that is actually interrupting the development of executive functions; it is the stress manifesting as a result of the root cause. The good news for teachers is that even though we may not be able to solve the root cause, as many of these experiences are beyond our sphere of influence, from within our classrooms we certainly can influence resulting stress! It is possible for teachers to create safe spaces (classrooms) that offer a reprieve from the stress students might be experiencing outside of school.

This truly is a primary goal, not just for our chaos navigators, but for all students. We must meet Maslow’s hierarchy of needs before Bloom’s, shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2.

Figure 1.1

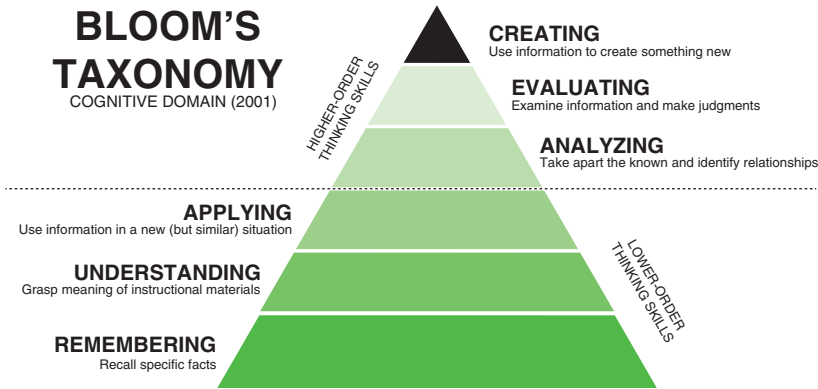
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



Source: istock.com/PytyCzech

Figure 1.2

Bloom's Taxonomy



Source: istock.com/Chavapong Prateep Na Thalang

While most teachers are prepared to focus on teaching the skills outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs shows us that until students' physiological and safety and security needs are met, they will not be able to attend to that level of higher-order skill development.

When teachers first tend to the designing and creating of safer learning spaces, a few things happen:

1. Students want to be at school.
2. Students are more engaged.
3. Students are happier.

When students consistently find themselves in a predictable learning environment, they can let their guard down to engage.

When students feel safe, they are more likely to take the risks inherent to learning (Ritchhart, 2015). No one said it better than Deborah Meier: "Learning happens fastest when the students trust the setting so much that they aren't afraid to take risks, make mistakes, or do something dumb. Learning works best, in fact, when the very idea that it is risky has not even occurred to kids" (Meier, 2002).

If we can give students a reprieve from the chaos outside of school, we have the opportunity to engage them in a very effective way. A

predictable routine, one that is consistently implemented, helps create a dependable learning environment. It may seem subtle, but for chaos navigators, this predictability is experienced as so much more than a fresh breath of air; it serves to reduce stress for kids (Denton & Kriete, 2000). It is a glimpse into how life can be lived outside of chaos and will pay dividends for the rest of their lives.

A byproduct of a predictable routine is that student grades and test scores will improve as well (though this is a lesser outcome than creating safety and developing executive functions) (Krashen, 1981). This is because when students consistently find themselves in a predictable learning environment, they can let their guard down to engage—their “affective filter” is lowered. They feel safe. That is why Paul Tough says that, “if we can improve a child’s environment in the specific ways that lead to better executive functioning, we can increase his prospects for success in a particularly efficient way” (Tough, 2012).

A comprehensive approach to teaching, one that includes research-based content teaching strategies, equitable and fair assessments, and appropriate use of technology, but also deliberately integrates executive function skill development, is likely to yield the best educational outcomes for all students.

Together with teachers from a large, urban, public high school, we reviewed 9th grade standardized test scores in the summer before year 2 of our multi-year collaboration. During year 1, the 9th grade team implemented a shared predictable learning routine and portfolios, which taken together serve to give students daily practice with executive functioning skills. At the end of that first year, all students, including those in every subgroup, had made significant gains on the state standardized tests which assess ELA (English Language Arts) and Mathematics. We discussed the gains with the 9th grade team and asked them what they believed caused the improvement in test scores. Without hesitation, they shared that it was their focus on teaching executive functions—noting that it was the only intervention or change to their collective teaching approach that was made the previous school year.

Their students’ results were the opposite of what is common following the 9th grade transition to high school. Regardless of the grade level, content area, or setting—rural, suburban, and urban, when students get practice with these skills and habits, their success rates improve. It is fascinating that executive functions can have such a positive impact on test and course performance, yet they are content and grade-level agnostic factors. ●

Let's make clear the distinction between *what* and *how* we learn. One is not more important than the other, but there is an order of operations we must follow. ***What*** we are learning is ***secondary***; the task of developing as a learner (*the how*) is ***primary***. When we lay the foundation for learning, students are free to build whatever they choose on that foundation because they are more independent learners.

Lack of Family Engagement

It goes without saying that students with more engaged families are more successful. We don't need a study to tell us this (although there are numerous meta-analyses on the topic, including Cooper et al., 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Robinson & Harris, 2005). What we do know is that family engagement is a variable that positively impacts a student's ability to succeed regardless of the "type" of family: race, socioeconomic level, age, family makeup, to name a few. This is what families want, too. Linda Darling-Hammond explains, "...what parents most need and most want are closer connections to the learning process for their individual child" (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Teaching executive functions provides teachers and schools with a unique and effective way to engage families as it is not predicated on content or curriculum understanding, and families appreciate that fact.

Even with strong agreement around the impact of family and parent involvement, most schools need help developing plans to build community partnerships (Epstein & Associates, 2002). It is not enough to simply expect or assume families will feel comfortable participating with and engaging in the larger school community. There are many valid reasons why some family members may have a more difficult time consistently engaging with the school community, but in most cases, the lack of family or parental participation is usually a result of either the school's lack of effort to include families or the invitation is not inclusive (Henderson et al., 2007), and in no way reflects a family's actual desire to partner with their child's school (Shirley & Clark, 2009). While this may not be intentional on the part of schools, well intentioned events and activities may fall flat if they are not designed in a culturally relevant way.

Language barriers are certainly not the only hurdle to engaging families, but one school's example of striving for inclusivity was to host family events in their multi-purpose room. The space was equipped with headphones for anyone who needed translation assistance, which allowed all families to more comfortably participate in the event. Schools experience increased family participation if their efforts to include them are relevant to the communities they serve.

Jonathan Kozol stresses this point by quoting *The Wall Street Journal*, "Big budgets don't boost achievement...It's parental influence that counts." He goes on to quote, "It is even possible to argue that schools themselves don't matter much, at least compared with parental influence" (Kozol, 1991). We will come back to the topic of engaging families in Chapter 9.

Even students with families that are less connected to the school community, those who are going at it alone, are far more likely to succeed if they develop their executive functioning skills over time! Regardless of a school's proactivity around family participation, teachers have to be clear about their spheres of influence and where they can have the greatest impact. In the search for the one change that will bring the greatest return for **all** students we find executive functions!

The Inequity of Low Expectations

In the effort to "catch students up," we must guard ourselves against lowering our expectations. A friend shared a story he heard from a keynote speaker at a conference he had attended. The presenter was describing her experience giving birth to her fourth child, who was born with down syndrome. Her previous children had not been born with the condition and she described how different the experience was in terms of the expectations the nursing staff had of her baby. The first came when she was trying to breastfeed her newborn. A nurse explained that her baby most likely won't latch as well as other newborns. Over the course of her few days in the hospital, she experienced many similar "exceptions" she would likely have to make.

This mother challenged her audience to avoid the "soft bigotry of low expectations."

Although this story is about her and her newborn infant's experience, I believe her words ring true for educators of all grades as well. Students who experience poverty, rural students, students of color, girls, LGBTQ youth, and other student groups from a marginalized background, experience lower expectations than their white and more affluent peers (Jerald, 2001). We also know that the view teachers adopt of their students directly influences their students' ability to succeed. Likewise, as Dweck so eloquently stated, "For twenty years, my research has shown that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value" (Dweck, 2006).

If we lower our expectations of students, they will achieve less—in the classroom and in life (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018). There has never been a more critical time to believe in our students' ability. If we lower our expectations, we encourage the self-fulfilling prophecy that individuals can't succeed. In doing so, we run the risk of reinforcing a self-view that students may carry with themselves moving forward, potentially for the rest of their lives.

Our charge is to maintain high expectations while we simultaneously address the issues arising from missed or interrupted schooling during the pandemic as well as other influences inhibiting success. Teachers need to make sure they are giving students the means of meeting their high expectations. Just maintaining expectations without specifically scaffolding is a recipe for failure.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic has obviously left an indelible mark on every facet of society, and education was not excluded. Fortunately, it has not all been bad news, and we will certainly be learning from this experience for many years to come.

What we do know is that the years of the pandemic have forced many students, perhaps all young people, to face a new kind of chaos and trauma—resulting in stress. The consistency of school vanished overnight. The classroom was replaced with the dining room or the living room, and for some rural students who struggled to have a stable internet connection, a coffee shop or public library (Dvorak, 2020).

Students trying to engage, were often in cramped quarters, next to siblings, with an overtaxed WIFI. Not to mention while we were wiping our groceries with bleach, there was an invisible illness haphazardly killing people of all ages around the globe. Before the pandemic, classmates and teachers alike did not enter (or get to see) the inside of a student's home on a daily basis. They did not hear the sounds inside their home. Sadly, one result of the pandemic is that many students, at a minimum, fell behind, while others faced the widening of existing achievement and equity gaps.

During this time, we worked with schools who served their students three meals a day—breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In fact, one district shared with us that they spent most of the first few months of the spring of 2020 not teaching but literally delivering food to the community they serve because if the students were not coming to school, they could not eat. It goes without saying that this uncertainty of Maslow's basic needs has a profound impact on a young person's ability to engage, focus, and learn, because of the underlying stress it creates. If a student is hungry or tired, or scared, or can't connect to WIFI, how can they possibly focus their attention on what they are being taught?

As we know, the success of distance learning was often predicated on a variety of factors, most outside of teachers' or schools' control.

Yet there were families who did not miss an educational beat during the pandemic, raising huge equity concerns. Families with a parent at home, one who was not also trying to work from home, were able to support their children throughout the school day. They could engage their children in extended learning or extracurricular activities after school. Families with more than one computer and ample connectivity were less likely to struggle logging on to attend school. Compare the experience of these students to those who huddle on a sidewalk outside of a café in search of a WIFI signal.

Following the years of COVID-19, it is unfair to expect the same from all students. The same is true of our expectations of teachers. The pandemic has only widened existing achievement and equity gaps, and teachers must address these iniquities as we ease back to "normal" school. At the same time, teachers will need grace and support in this process as

they will simultaneously be responsible for staying on pace while teaching the content of their class(es).

The obvious is worth stating: Communities that experienced a higher degree of interrupted schooling have greater challenges to address.

Children who have been impacted by interrupted schooling are likely to face lifelong implications. But the truly incredible news is that teachers literally have the ability to reverse the influence of these factors in students’ lives if we commit to helping our students develop executive functions. It’s a big responsibility but also an honor!

Researchers from Stanford found that “...executive functioning in our brain plays a key role in protecting against risk factors that worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety during stressful, uncertain times.” They go on to suggest that, “It’s possible that such a targeted intervention (executive function training) would reduce the chances of experiencing psychopathologies like depression and anxiety in the face of stress, like a pandemic...” (Stanford News, 2022).

Even though the trauma from the pandemic may weaken or stall the development of executive functions, when strengthened, these skills and habits help improve students’ emotional well-being.

I believe this is our “Call to Action” for any educator on the planet who cares deeply about students and their future success in school and life. Students are not fulfilling their potential *not* because they are incapable, and *not* because of their socio-economic status or even because they lived through a pandemic. Students are being left behind in school because of disparities in executive functions.

We Can’t Afford Executive Dysfunction Any Longer

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The costs associated with underdeveloped or weak executive functioning skills are high, long-lasting, and wide-reaching.

For younger students, a narrative develops that they “aren’t good at school.” For students who are already facing enormous challenges outside of school, they cannot afford to negotiate this

narrative. It is difficult to motivate students who are gripped by low self-efficacy. There is real shame, confusion, and fear in this student experience.

Students who grow up “good” at English and math—they can spell and read well at a young age and generally can do arithmetic early on—hear an entirely different narrative. These students are told that they are “smart” and that they *can* achieve.

If you hear anything enough times, you begin to believe it.

We must note the lack of fairness here. Based entirely on one’s lived experience, some students are more likely to develop or “pick up” some of these skills as they move through life. Others, with different life experiences, will not. As educators, we shoulder the responsibility of leveling the playing field, so all students have the opportunity to succeed. Robert Belfanz in *Putting Middle Grades Students on The Graduation Path* explains how we address this inequity: “In moving to college and career readiness for all, we must now teach some skills formerly learned by students on their own. All students need lessons and modeling of study and work skills like time and task management, note taking, and assignment completion strategies...” (Belfanz, 2009).

There is a cost for teachers, too. Many teachers spend more time managing, coaxing, and disciplining student behavior than actually teaching. This not only keeps teachers from doing what they are hired to do, it also prevents them from engaging in what they love to do and what brings them energy: teaching.

Interestingly, what appears on the surface to be behavioral issues causing classroom distractions and management concerns, are actually behaviors manifesting from dysregulation. When students lack the skills and habits that are the hallmarks of successful learners, they are more likely to demonstrate off-task behavior. Ross Greene explains that “Lagging skills are the why of challenging behavior” (Greene, 2008). Behaviors that teachers are left to manage.

Even if teachers recognize that most classroom management issues result because students lack the foundation for learning, what are they to do about it? As we discussed previously, often teachers lack the class time and expertise to teach executive functioning skills. This is far beyond frustrating for teachers, it is paralyzing. No wonder attrition rates are so high

for teachers like Amelia in the first three years of entering the profession!

But for those who are reading this book, I want you to know that there is an answer, a path forward, and you can do it!

Helping students develop executive function skills and habits will create a seismic shift in their lives and therefore the world.

So, let's get to it. Turn the page for an introduction to the six executive functions that play a significant role in building the foundation for learning and academic success!

Reflection Questions

1. What has had the greatest impact on student learning and achievement in your classroom?
2. What are the areas in your practice that are less sustainable than others? How will you adjust those areas to protect yourself against burnout?
3. How can you bring about more clarity to your classroom or lessons to help reduce the cognitive load for your students?
4. What differences have you noticed in your students, post-pandemic? How can you use executive functioning skills to address some of those areas of concern?
5. What stresses, on an individual basis, are your students navigating outside of school?
6. What's the difference between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Bloom's Taxonomy? Why would it be more important to meet Maslow's needs before Bloom's? How can you accomplish this in your classroom?
7. How can you increase the engagement of your students' families?