

Teaching Strategies for Struggling K-12 Learners

12 evidence-backed strategies across 5 focus areas

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- This guide presents STUDIES-backed instructional strategies specifically selected for below-grade-level learners in K-12 classrooms.
 - Each strategy includes a classroom application tip, an expanded note, and links to primary STUDIES sources.
 - Strategies are grouped by focus area: Scaffolding, Engagement, Low-stakes Assessment, Structure & Routine, and Motivation.
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Go to:

SCAFFOLDING

ENGAGEMENT

LOW-STAKES ASSESSMENT

STRUCTURE & ROUTINE

MOTIVATION

SCAFFOLDING

SCAFFOLDING

Chunking

Break tasks and content into smaller, sequential pieces. Students master one chunk before moving to the next, reducing working memory overload.

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In class: Give a 3-step math problem as three separate slips of paper. Only reveal the next step after the student completes the current one.

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Tip: Works especially well for multi-step writing assignments, long division, and science lab procedures. Pair with a visual checklist so students can self-monitor progress.

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STUDIES

- [Pearson / ACER \(2022\) – Chunking & cognitive load in K-12](#)
- [Cowan \(2014\) – Working memory underpins learning \(STUDIESGate\)](#)

SCAFFOLDING

Graphic organizers

Provide visual frameworks — concept maps, T-charts, story maps — that help students organize ideas before writing or discussing.

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Start with: A partially completed organizer. Students fill in the gaps rather than build from nothing.

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Tip: *Gradually fade the pre-filled portions as students gain confidence. Free tools: Canva, Google Slides templates, or hand-drawn on paper.*

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STUDIES

- [Kim et al. \(2004\) – Graphic organizers & LD reading comprehension \(PubMed\)](#)
- [Tandfonline \(2024\) – Meta-analysis: GOs for students with disabilities](#)

SCAFFOLDING

Word walls & anchor charts

Post key vocabulary, formulas, or sentence starters visibly in the room. Struggling readers need the same words seen repeatedly in context.

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Make it interactive: Add a new word with students each week and revisit older ones daily with a quick 'point and say' routine.

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Tip: *Anchor charts are most effective when co-created with students — they remember what they helped build.*

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STUDIES

- [IES What Works Clearinghouse – Vocabulary instruction practice guide](#)

ENGAGEMENT

ENGAGEMENT

Peer-assisted learning

Pair struggling students with a partner for guided practice. Explaining and listening to a peer often lands better than teacher-led instruction.

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Structure it: Use a 'think-pair-share' or 'coach and player' format so both roles stay active and neither student is passive.

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Tip: Rotate pairs weekly. Avoid always pairing the same students — varied pairings build broader classroom connection.

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STUDIES

- [Evidence for ESSA — PALS Reading, Elementary Struggling Readers](#)
- [IES WWC \(2012\) — PALS intervention report](#)

ENGAGEMENT

Gamified practice

Use low-stakes games — Kahoot, Quizlet Live, card games — to create repetition without the anxiety of formal review.

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Key rule: Games should feel safe to lose. Avoid public scoreboards that highlight who is lowest. Use team formats instead.

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Tip: Even simple card games made from index cards (matching, go fish with vocabulary) outperform worksheet drills for retention.

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STUDIES

- [Plass, Homer & Kinzer \(2015\) — Foundations of game-based learning \(Ed. Psychologist\)](#)

ENGAGEMENT

Hands-on manipulatives (CRA)

Use physical or digital objects to make abstract concepts concrete, following the Concrete > Representational > Abstract (CRA) sequence.

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Transition out: Move from concrete to representational (drawing) to abstract (symbols) as students gain mastery.

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Tip: Virtual manipulatives via Desmos or the National Library of Virtual Manipulatives work when physical materials aren't available.

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STUDIES

- [Ebner et al. \(2025\) — Meta-analytic review of CRA math approach \(SAGE Journals\)](#)
- [Flores \(2010\) — CRA sequence for students at risk \(Remedial & Special Education\)](#)

LOW-STAKES ASSESSMENT

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Exit tickets

A single question or quick task at the end of class that shows exactly who needs reteaching before the next lesson.

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Keep it tiny: One sentence, one equation, one labeled diagram. A low bar still reveals understanding without adding pressure.

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Tip: Sort exit tickets into three piles: got it, almost, not yet. Use 'almost' and 'not yet' to plan the next day's opening activity.

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STUDIES

- [Black & Wiliam \(1998\) — Inside the Black Box: formative assessment \(effect size d=0.40-0.70\)](#)
- [NSTA — Exit tickets as classroom formative assessment tools](#)

LOW-STAKES ASSESSMENT

Frequent check-ins

Brief 1-on-1 or small-group conversations mid-activity reveal misconceptions that written work hides.

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During work time: Ask 'tell me what you're thinking here' rather than 'do you understand?' Open questions reveal more.

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Tip: Students who struggle rarely raise their hand. The check-in is your signal — don't wait for them to ask.

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STUDIES

- [Hattie & Timperley \(2007\) — The Power of Feedback \(Review of Educational Research\)](#)
- [Frontiers in Psychology \(2019\) — Meta-analysis of feedback research, d=0.48](#)

STRUCTURE & ROUTINE

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Consistent daily routines

Predictable class openings, transitions, and closings reduce cognitive load, freeing up more mental energy for actual learning.

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Post the agenda: A visible, consistent agenda (even just 3 items on the board) helps struggling learners anticipate and prepare rather than react.

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Tip: Include a 'brain warm-up' — 3-5 minutes of low-stakes review at the start — to ease students in, especially after transitions.

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STUDIES

- [Sweller \(1988\) — Cognitive load theory \(Cognition & Instruction. foundational study\)](#)

STRUCTURE & ROUTINE

Flexible grouping

Rotate between whole class, small group, and independent work. Struggling learners often access content better in smaller settings.

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Use data to group: Group by specific skill gaps for short intervention windows (10-15 min), not by 'low/mid/high' labels that can stigmatize.

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Tip: Flexible groups should change at least every 1-2 weeks so no student is locked into a 'slow group' identity.

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STUDIES

- [Tomlinson \(2014\) — The Differentiated Classroom \(ASCD overview\)](#)

MOTIVATION

MOTIVATION

Mastery-based feedback

Frame feedback around growth — 'you got 3 of these right that you missed last week' — rather than comparing to peers or grade-level benchmarks.

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Use before/after: Show students a simple graph of their own progress over time. Even small gains feel motivating when made visible.

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Tip: *This aligns with CBE principles — progress is measured against the student's own trajectory, not a single-point snapshot.*

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STUDIES

- [Hattie & Timperley \(2007\) — The Power of Feedback \(Review of Educational Research\)](#)
- [ASCD — Lessons of mastery learning \(formative assessment & prescriptive feedback\)](#)

MOTIVATION

Relationship-first culture

Struggling learners often disengage not from inability but from shame or fear of failure. A trusting teacher relationship is the foundation everything rests on.

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2x10 strategy: Spend 2 minutes for 10 consecutive days having a genuine non-academic conversation with a disengaged student.

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Tip: *Developed by researcher Raymond Wlodkowski — found an 85% improvement in targeted student behavior, with ripple effects across the whole class.*

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STUDIES

- [Wlodkowski \(1993\) via Panorama Ed — 2x10 relationship-building research overview](#)
- [EdSource — The Two-by-Ten Strategy \(original Wlodkowski findings\)](#)