“Work Smarter, Not Harder!” – Slow Starters

by Kathryn Dusek, Humanities 7th Grade

For this week’s theme in “Work Smarter, Not Harder!” the students created a video on how important it is to **Plan Ahead on Big Projects**. They recommend the following steps: 1. Start early, 2. Plan ahead, 3. Break into small tasks and 4. Take small breaks when working.

Knowing this would be the topic the students would focus on, I wanted to focus this newsletter on step 3 “Breaking a big job into smaller tasks.” As both a teacher and a mom, I know there are students whom I refer to as "**Slow Starters**:" the ones who are given a task and stare blankly at the page.  So I wanted to give some tips of what works for me.  First, I want to acknowledge I know kids will listen to teachers better than parents (at least mine does!).  But this is what I do in the classroom, if I notice someone is having trouble focusing and/or getting started…

Middle school students are old enough to realize that if they work and focus, they will be finished sooner so they can move on to things that are more fun. So why don’t they just do this? I believe it’s often due to feeling overwhelmed, so I will approach them and say, "OK.  What can you realistically do in just the next 5 minutes?” If it's SS notes, they might say reading and taking notes on 3 paragraphs.  **Key Point**: **If your student suffers from low confidence, set the bar low to start with! Your overall goal is to increase their confidence.** Believe me, when they feel more confident, they will work faster. If they feel they can’t meet a goal, they are much less likely to try because they already feel like failures. So make it a small goal in a small amount of time.

So once we have a plan, my reply is, "OK.  I'm going to check on you in 5 minutes and see your progress."  Then I walk away and do my own thing.  **Key Point: Most students this age really dislike being "hovered over" because they want to feel in control and independent**.  So unless they ask for assistance, they usually do better without someone sitting right next to them.

Then I make sure to return in 5 minutes.  **Key Point: Praise, praise, praise with "you" statements.**  "You did a great job!  Look how hard you worked!  You got it done."  (Praise the effort, not the intelligence; not "you are so smart!" Why? Because in their minds, the reverse might be true that “you are not smart because you did not do the work.” But is that accurate? Usually they did not do the work because they were distracted, not because there is a lack of intelligence. And even if they do NOT understand that is not a lack of *intelligence*. That is a lack of knowledge and skill that can be improved upon with practice!)

So what do you do if they didn't get it done?  Praise what WAS done.  "OK. Look at what you did.  You finished the reading and wrote one sentence.  Good start!"

Now plan what will happen in the next 5 minutes.  Decrease the expectations if needed from the first attempt; remember your goal is to increase their self-confidence. Then, repeat the pattern of check, praise, and plan.  Eventually (like maybe a few days or possibly a week later), you can start increasing the amount of work that is going to be done during that 5 minutes, or check every 10.  It depends on your student.

**Summary**: I find that students who feel overwhelmed by a task do best if they are focusing on one small step at a time.  The check by the adult gives them a sense of accomplishment, and of course they soak up the praise like a sponge.

I hope this helps.  Have a great week, everybody!