

I-1: Convince students that hard work leads to success (“I Can”)

Treat Mistakes as Opportunities to Learn

For students to be willing to take the necessary academic risks to achieve, they must believe that mistakes present an opportunity for growth. If you want students to see mistakes as opportunities for improvement you will need to demonstrate this belief. Your class policies will need to mirror and instill this value.

The following principles and guidelines will help students overcome their inevitable fears of failure by reinforcing the notion that “we all make mistakes:”

Guiding Principles	Implications
All students benefit from discussing errors	Rarely ignore incorrect answers Spend as much, if not more time analyzing incorrect answers as you do going over correct ones.
Use mistakes to explore a student’s thinking and eliminate the source of the confusion	Avoid simply telling a student that his answer is wrong or quickly providing the correct answer. Instead you might ask, “What led you to that answer?” or “How do you know that is a good answer?” For more on this topic, visit the E-3 page (“Check for academic understanding”).
Encourage/require multiple attempts	If you want students to see mistakes as opportunities for improvement, allow, if not require, students to retake an assessment on which they did not demonstrate adequate mastery of the objectives. This assessment should address the same objectives but in a slightly different way.
Share mistakes	Create a “Mistakes Wall” in your classroom where students can post their imperfect work with notes about what they learned from those mistakes.
Incorporate “re-dos” into your grading system	To show students that hard work leads to success, ensure that your grading system includes the higher grade on a re-done assessment or incorporates homework completion as part of an effort grade.
Practice what you preach	If you make a mistake when grading a test, writing on the board, or responding to a question, admit it and model how you plan to avoid that same mistake in the future. In response to her own spelling mistake (<i>spinal chora</i>), Margaret Cate (a teacher in Washington, DC) thanked the student who noted her error and later posted the piece of paper on which she wrote the proper spelling twenty-five times. She explained to her students that looking at and writing the word multiple times helped her internalize the

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	proper spelling for the future.
Remind students of the growth they have made	Some elementary teachers have their students develop “I Can” cans (a decorated coffee can). When students master a skill, they write that skill (“I can multiply fractions” or “I can write a friendly letter”) on a strip of paper and put it in the can. Later, if students are struggling to master a new skill, the teacher can say, “Remember when you couldn’t add, subtract, or multiply fractions? Now look in your “I Can” can! Soon you’ll be adding strips about how you have mastered decimals.”
Pay attention to your tone	Students may feel defensive when they have made errors, so the tone of your response will be crucial. Stay positive and non-judgmental.
Be thankful for the opportunity to clarify	When providing feedback, especially when a student has made a mistake, be sure to send the message that you are glad for the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings and to do a better job of explaining the new knowledge or skill.