

CONTACT

The Teachers' Digest

ALL-ROUND APPROACH

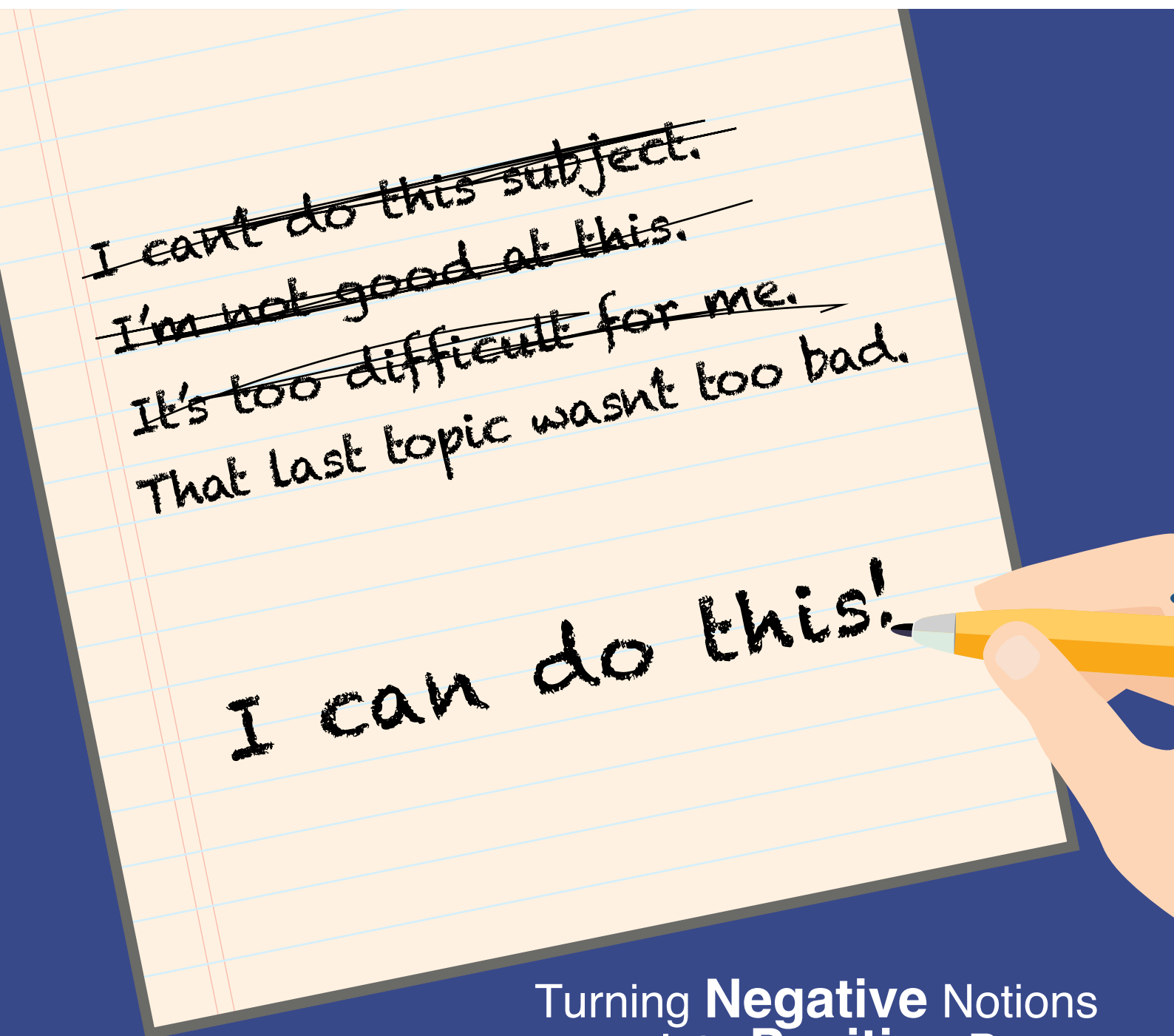
Build positivity and community in class with Circle Time

EASING FEARS

Teachers share how they help students overcome first-day jitters

PRECIOUS NOTES

Read what students have to say to their beloved teachers



Turning **Negative** Notions
Into **Positive** Power

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Can you solve this?

Show us how well you read *Contact* and you may be a winner!

CONTACT

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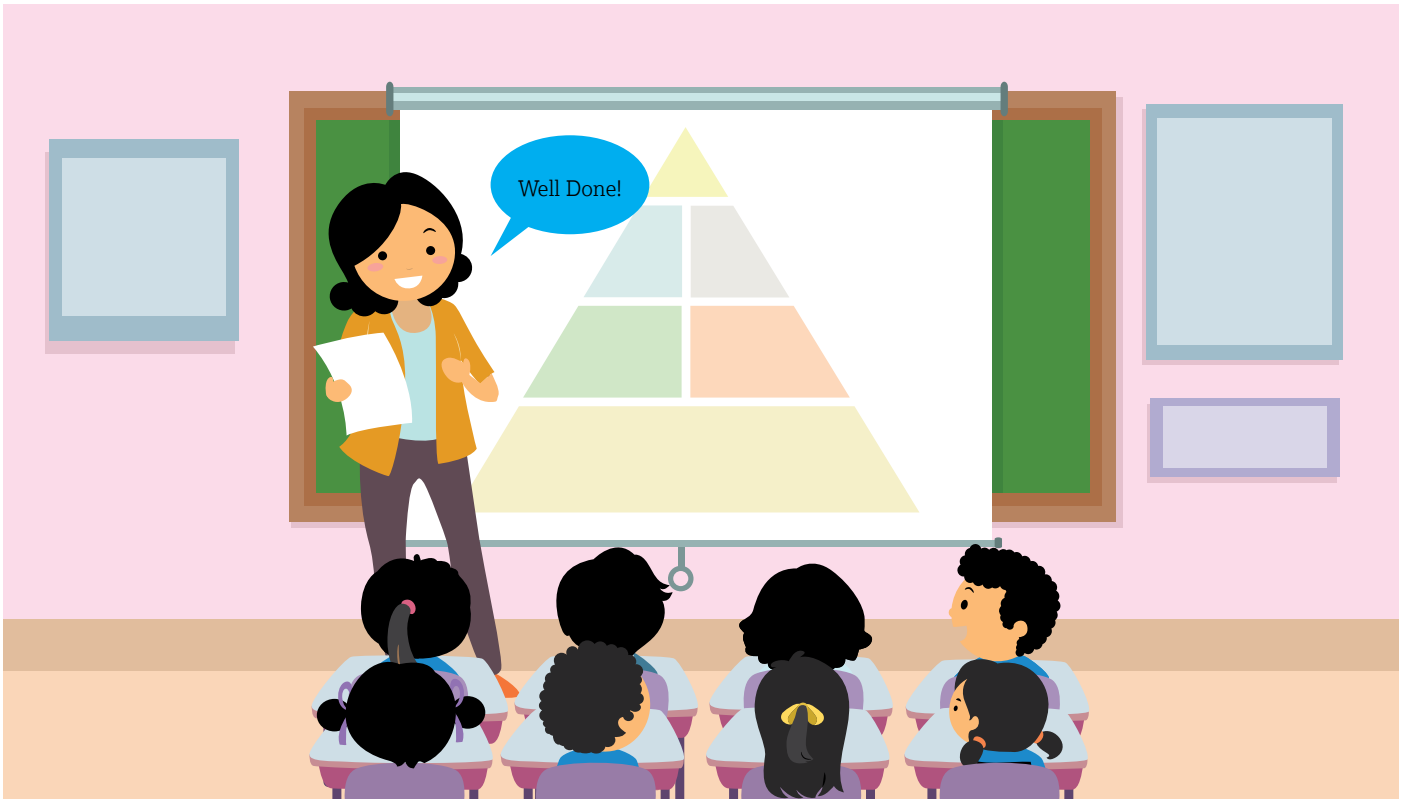


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THIS ISSUE...



Often, the reason students underperform in school is because they lack the motivation to do well. Some feel as though they are simply not cut out for academic excellence, or that school is irrelevant to their dream jobs. As a result, such students might become disruptive in class, get poorer and poorer grades, or skip school altogether.

What can be done to turn these students around, and make them realise their full potential? In this issue's cover story, we visit three schools and learn about the programmes in place to encourage their demotivated students. Find out how these teachers build up students' confidence levels as well as their independence, thus influencing their drive to excel.

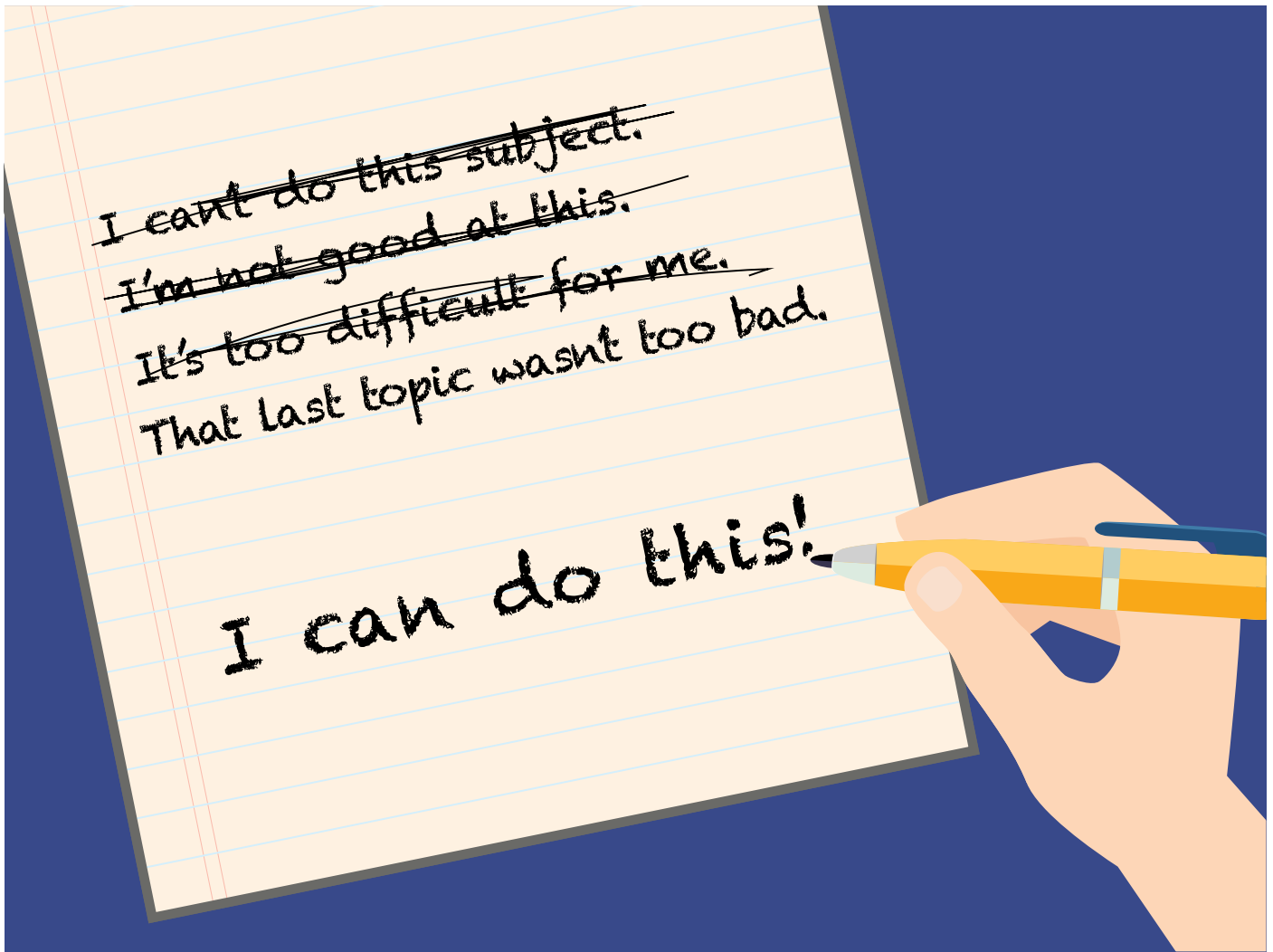
In addition, we look at how schools manage the transitions both students and parents face on the first

day of school – particularly Primary 1 and Secondary 1 students. In *Teachers' Voices*, you will read about the various measures schools adopt to ease students into the new rigour, and assure parents that their children are in good hands.

Stress is a familiar concept, but do we know how to help students manage it? In FYI, we explore some interesting methods that schools all over the world have embraced in order to reduce stress in schools and recharge their students. From art therapy to reading sessions, you might be inspired to try out one or two ideas in your classroom.

So immerse yourself in these stories, gain some insights, and have fun reading! 📖

The *Contact* Team



Getting to the **can-do mindset**

Everybody can be motivated. The key lies in helping students adopt a positive attitude and unlocking their potential.

We have all seen restless students in class. And we know classroom disruptions can happen – and multiply – if a student who is popular with peers does not cooperate with the teacher and influences their classmates to do the same.

But think about it: isn't this ability – to inspire people to follow – something we look for in leaders?

And if teachers can turn such students around to lead and influence their friends positively, "ringleaders" can be valuable assets in classrooms.

Dr Dennis Kom, Lead Specialist from MOE's Guidance Branch, believes such turnaround cases are possible.

"Even a delinquent can be a motivated student – though that may not be motivation in a socially acceptable way," explained Dr Kom. "So the 'trick' here is how the school, community and family can turn the motivation in a more pro-social direction."

This is why some teachers take the chance to give the ringleader-type student leadership responsibilities, such as by making them class representative, he added.

"The teacher is giving these students an opportunity to exercise his strength in a pro-social context, allowing him to contribute positively. And we have seen such students turn around in many instances because they realise that they can be a positive influence."

MINDSET IS CRUCIAL

Students can lose motivation for their studies or school for several reasons. They may have started out as enthusiastic learners but been discouraged by setbacks along the way. Or they may have had little academic success and are convinced they are not cut out for school, and feel they are being forced to complete tasks that do not appeal to them at all.

But there are no “unteachable” students. It boils down to their attitude and not just aptitude.

Stanford psychologist Prof. Carol Dweck, one of the world’s leading researchers in the field of motivation, believes that students adopting the right mindset is key to keeping them motivated.

Her research discusses two types of mindsets: growth and fixed. She found that people with a growth mindset are able to embrace challenges and persist even when they fail. They believe in putting in effort to achieve mastery, learn well from criticism, and find lessons in the successes of others.

Individuals with a fixed mindset avoid challenges, give up easily, do not believe that working hard pays off, and feel threatened when they see others doing well. This results in them often not reaching full potential.

Commenting on the growth mindset, Dr Kom said: “The truth is we can always become better with effort. If you practice something over and over again, you will quite naturally get better at it.”

For those with a fixed mindset, they tend to believe that if they are not born with a talent, there is no point trying – so they stop putting in effort.

“Take singing as an example. Those with a fixed mindset will believe that if someone is born with little talent in singing, then that is it,” he added.

“However, even if I am not a natural singer, if I work hard, I will sing better than I do currently. Previously, I might ‘croak like a frog’, but with effort, at least I’ll be able to sing a tune that you can understand. Having a growth mindset can help make this difference.”

EXPANDING YOUNG MINDS

Juying Primary School believes in nurturing a growth mindset early. To make it easy for young children to understand the concept, the student development team used a mixture of pop songs, children’s movies and videos, and assembly talks to seed the idea.

For instance, students watched a short clip from the Disney movie *Zootopia* and learnt how Judy, a small rabbit, overcame the odds to become an



Students write notes about growth and fixed mindsets to learn about them.
Photo from Juying Primary School

upstanding policewoman in a police department filled with lions, tigers, huge buffaloes and rhinos.

Pop singer Bruno Mars’ song, *Don’t Give Up*, with lyrics such as “Don’t ever quit, try and try and you can do it, don’t give up”, was also played at recess time.

Students were encouraged to write out their thoughts about both mindsets on sticky notes. Then, they pinned notes with growth mindset messages on the class noticeboard, while fixed mindset statements were crumpled up and dumped into a box.

“If we had just taught them the theory about growth mindset, I don’t think we would be able to engage them,” said Madam Nitthiya Rengasamy, Year Head (Lower Primary), who is also part of the student development team.

“But we broke down the concept into these age-appropriate activities for them and showed them how it is applicable in all situations.”

These activities created a common language among students. “You hear them telling their friends to try harder and work towards their goals. Students also pen reflections in their journals and talk about how they learnt to embrace challenges,” she added.

“If we had just taught them the theory about growth mindset, I don’t think we would be able to engage them”

– Madam Nitthiya Rengasamy
Year Head
(Lower Primary)

HELPING STUDENTS HELP THEMSELVES

Apart from positive thinking, students are also motivated by choice. This idea is captured in the self-determination theory, which states that everyone has three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Motivation and optimal growth are more likely to follow once these three basic needs are satisfied.

In 2014, **Tanjong Katong Girls' School** wanted to know why some students were underperforming. They were not submitting assignments and participating in class discussions, despite showing early academic potential.

Embarking on a study with support from MOE's Guidance Branch, the school found that autonomy, competence and relatedness were major factors determining a student's motivation.

When students are not given the space to have their voices heard and equipped to make decisions for themselves, this impedes the development of their identities as they are not allowed to explore and pursue their interests, shared Mrs Mary Seah, Principal.

"As an illustration, we found that when the school, the subject combination or the co-curricular activity that students are in is not one of their preferred choices, but one imposed by others, the student is less motivated to do well," she added.

With this insight, the school then revised how it designed its programmes and decided to provide choices, within the constraints of resources, of course.

For instance, students now get to select which Values-In-Action (VIA) themes they would like to explore, instead of having one assigned. At Sec 2 level, this means students in the same class may choose to join like-minded teachers and peers.



Serangoon Garden Secondary School took onboard its students' suggestion to organise a school carnival.
Photo by Serangoon Garden Secondary School



“The process of letting them have a choice has provided a space for their voice. They feel good when their opinions are being considered.”

– Mrs Cheong Peck Yoke,
Senior Teacher for
Chemistry

Mrs Cheong Peck Yoke, Senior Teacher for Chemistry, added: “The process of letting them have a choice has provided a space for their voice. They feel good when their opinions are being considered.”

The school also built in consultation periods in the timetable – white space where students are free to approach any teacher to ask for help regarding schoolwork. But if they wanted, students could instead choose to use the time to reflect on their learning, convene group discussions with friends, or not do anything at all.

“Usually by Secondary 3 and 4, [the students] really grab this chance for consultation,” explained Mrs Seah. “We want to build that climate for striving. There’s a platform where teachers are available. The message is that we are here to help but you must first help yourself.”

Sometimes, schools have to deal with “helicopter parents”. They are overprotective parents who are so involved in their children’s affairs that it may result in their children lacking the self-confidence to navigate their learning. This results in shaky levels of motivation.

“When parents are too domineering, it crowds out [students’] intrinsic motivation. The children can feel lost and empty inside,” said Ms Loh Sein Ling, Year Head (Upper Secondary).

The school constantly encourages parents to trust their children to make decisions on their own, by engaging them at events such as parent-teacher conferences and through communication channels like emails and letters.

At **Serangoon Garden Secondary**, the school gives students the opportunity to shape their learning environment. It runs a school-wide forum once a year (mass-assembly style) where students are invited to give feedback about what they would like to see in school.

Students have asked if they could wear sports shoes to school, as the right footwear helps them perform better during PE lessons. They also wanted to know if the school could build recreational rooms, so they could stay back after school to hang out and relax with their friends. Students also asked to revive an old tradition of the school organising a carnival.

The school staff take onboard the feedback after the annual forum. School rules were tweaked to allow students to wear sports shoes, with guidelines on colours and style. Recreational rooms with Xbox consoles, pool tables and board games were also added.

And students were tasked to think of booths and activities for the school carnival, and get hands-on with the planning. The proceeds collected from the funfair went to needy students in the school.

Ms Tay Hui Yih, Year Head (Lower Secondary) said: “We are trying to develop our students’ voices during the forum. We definitely cannot accede to every request our students have. But we make it a point to get back to students to explain why something cannot be done.”

CELEBRATING SMALL VICTORIES

Students must see what they are learning in school as useful, meaningful and relevant. “If a student is interested in being a beautician, they may not see why they have to go through English or History,” explained Dr Kom.

“But perhaps we can explain to them that Science is important because they will be dealing with some chemicals.”

While education and career guidance counselling can help students get a clearer sense of their aspirations and connect textbook concepts with reality, he acknowledged that it can still be challenging for teachers to help students join the dots. In such cases, teachers’ relationships with their students are key.

“Some students, once you get them to trust you, they will work hard for you. They may not see the relevance of studying but because of the class culture and rapport with the teacher, they will say ‘Let’s do it,’” he noted.

Ultimately, there is no shortcut to motivate students. It is simply about making students feel valued, supported and respected. And teachers play a crucial role in helping students adopt the right mindset. They can create the right conditions in the classroom that nurture motivation.

Basically, it is about celebrating small steps. If a student used to skip school thrice a week, but is now missing only a day of lessons, that small achievement

deserves recognition even as the monitoring of the student's attendance continues. Teachers can seize such moments and let students experience small successes.

Such moments can motivate students to never give up on themselves and realise they are capable of improving. Troublemaker or role model, every student can be motivated to do better. c

Don't give up!



Recharging bodies and brains

We all like to push ourselves to do better, but sometimes enough is enough. It is time to take a breather. Sweating it out while doing math, or reading to dogs may not be the first things that come to mind, but these are some of the innovative ways schools around the world are helping students recharge.

Like to move it, move it

Sweating it out beats sitting still for too long. Studies show that physical activity reduces lethargy as well as improves alertness and concentration. Exercise allows the body to release endorphins, which are natural chemicals produced by our brain that makes us feel good. They also improve our ability to sleep.

No time to exercise? You could blend curriculum time with cardio workouts. Lake Park Elementary in Oklahoma, United States, introduced a revolutionary way of learning – by mixing it with physical exercise. Classrooms are arranged to simulate an obstacle course with workout stations. For instance, there are cardio machines that students use as they learn vocabulary with flashcards mounted on easels.

A Dutch study also found that students who did physically active lessons had higher scores in math and spelling than their peers who sat still in class.

These lessons involved constant practice reinforced by body movements. In math, for instance, students jumped in place eight times to solve the multiplication problem 2×4 . So, thumbs up for sweaty rather than sedentary students!



Going green to chase the blues away

We all know it is good to look at greenery to give our eyes a break from staring at books or the computer. But it goes beyond soothing the eyes. Memory and attention spans can improve by up to 20 per cent after taking a walk in natural surroundings, according to studies.

In Japan, forest bathing, or *shinrin-yoku*, is part of its national health programme. People would go to the woods to find some quietness and unplug from everyday life. The Indian High School in Dubai has its very own urban forest to help students improve their physical and mental well-being. The school has planted about 2,000 trees within the 30,000 sq ft and 1km-long “forest”, which is divided into six zones, each with a specific way to help students relieve stress.

In Singapore, most schools have gardens or fields. Consider holding lessons in the midst of these natural surroundings for a change. It is not only good for eyesights but also invigorating for students who may start to pay more attention in their “green class”.



Reading to... dogs?

Inner calm can be found when you are immersed in a book, with stress levels dropping by up to 68 per cent. Reading a book, especially fiction, engages the imagination and provides a momentary escape from the daily grind. The same study found that reading for just six minutes was enough to calm down your heart rate. In a world full of distractions and multitasking, reading also helps to hone concentration skills, enabling students to focus better in class.

Most schools have reading programmes, but one school in Baltimore, United States, adds an unexpected element to theirs – pet dogs. At Westport Academy Elementary and Middle School, students practise reading to dogs to improve their skills and boost their self-esteem. Initially they reported feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable reading out loud, not to mention reciting to dogs. But after the session, they felt more relaxed and excited about reading.



Enhance that positivity with some “coffitivity”

Have you heard about lifestyle offices that look more like cafes than workspaces? It is supposed to boost productivity. If you can't quite re-create a cafe in your classroom, you could inject the cafe vibe with “coffitivity” – the sounds of chatter you hear in a cafe. Research found that such background sounds might actually provide that creative spark.

So tune into “coffitivity” sounds in the classroom – a totally new genre of music. Listening to other types of music can also help calm the senses. Classical music in particular can slow the heart rate, lower blood pressure and also decrease levels of stress hormones.

You can even take a more hands-on approach and create music. At Burnaby Central Secondary in Canada, special-needs students spend time banging on drums and ringing bells to relieve stress. Teachers have reported that making music helps these students calm down and be able to focus. It has also improved their overall cognitive skills.



Creative doodling

A little doodling goes a long way to calm the mind. Making art is a meditative practice, allowing you to take your mind off things for the moment. Creating art also lowers blood pressure, pulse rate and breathing rate as well. It increases dopamine in the brain, which allows one to experience feelings of enjoyment and bliss.

In Hong Kong, some secondary schools have implemented an arts therapy programme for students. The programme is not only limited to drawing, but other forms of creative activities such as writing, drama and dance performances. The activities are tailored for different types of students. For example, introverted students can opt for painting and writing activities, whereas outgoing students can try dance or drama.

Following the sessions, students were reported to be more willing to express their emotions in the classroom and were in better control of them.




Getting some shut-eye



Napping is often frowned upon in schools, but it may actually be good for students to put their head down for a rest. A 2015 study conducted by Nanyang Technological University found that four in 10 children, between the age of 6 and 9 in Singapore, are sleep-deprived.

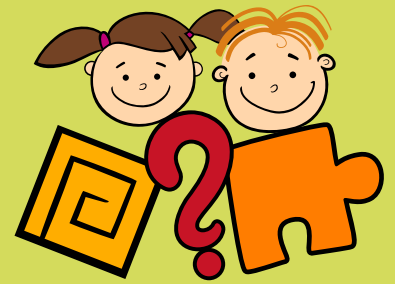
Taking a short nap of 20 to 30 minutes can help to improve mood and increase alertness. It also improves productivity and reduces the chances of burnout for students as well, according to studies.

Some schools are helping their students to sleep. At Las Cruces High School in New Mexico, United States, there is a sleep pod that resembles a spaceship capsule for students to have some shut-eye in between lessons. Students lie on a recliner and nap for about 20 minutes, with soft music playing in the background. The school has reported that students feel more productive in class and in better control of their emotions after taking a nap. 

Do you have other interesting examples to share?

Write to us at contact_online@moe.edu.sg

Game on!



Can you guess which fun facts belong to these old-school games?

Apparently, an ancient form of this game was played by Roman children in ancient Britain. It was adapted from the 30-metre version used by the Empire's soldiers to improve their footwork – with field packs and full armour, no less.



HIDE AND SEEK

The game was found imprinted on many ruins in the ancient city Assos. In 1952, the electronic delay storage automatic calculator (or EDSAC), an early computer at the University of Cambridge, had a version called "OXO", one of the first known video games.



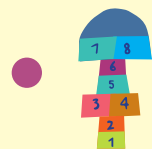
CAPTEH

In 2005, auction houses Christie's and Sotheby's played this game for a US\$20 million collection of Impressionist paintings. (Christie's was the winner.)




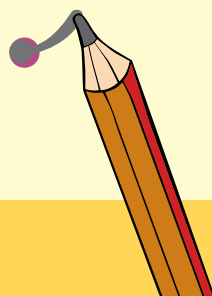
TIC-TAC-TOE

The playground favourite is not only a childhood pastime, but also an international sporting event. The tournament, known as the Nascondino World Championship, is held in Italy where athletes across the globe come to compete and represent their country.



HOPSCOTCH

This game dates back to 5th century BC in China, and is known as *ti jianzi*, or "kick arrow". During the Tang dynasty, Shaolin monks were known to have practised the game to strengthen their martial art skills. 



**SCISSORS,
PAPER,
STONE**

Coming full circle

A circle is a powerful shape associated with sharing and cooperation. Look at how schools are using the circle to engage students and build positivity and community in class.



“In the circle, we got students to share the negative things people have said to them. They may have been told that they are hopeless and that they can’t study, or they are doomed to fail. Sometimes, it is their parents who have said hurtful things to them.” – Mr Tan Aik Fong

The girls at **CHIJ Katong Convent (Secondary)** sit in an intriguing circular pattern in class – the Sec 1 students form two concentric circles, with the inner group facing the outer ring. It is Circle Time, and they share with each other what they want to work towards as a class.

It is an activity every class in the school does at the beginning of the year, to mark the start of a new school year. After sharing with the partner opposite, those in the inner circle move three places to their left. In this way, students get to interact with different classmates.

Mrs Helen Lie, Senior Teacher of Character and Citizenship Education (CCE), wants students to talk about what contributes to a positive class environment and what each of them can do to make it happen. The circle activity comes to a close when each student decides what they will do, ranging from making friends with a student from a different primary school to offering to comfort classmates when they are upset.

The circle structure is used again in another session. This time, it is led by student leaders appointed by Mrs Lie, who guide different co-curricular activity (CCA) groups to talk about their CCA experiences, the challenges they face and how they handle difficulties.

The discussion gets animated, especially when students talk about how their team mates support each other during intense physical training sessions and cope with the stress of competitions.

Mrs Lie uses these Circle Time sessions, a teaching strategy that originated from the United States, which has since been adopted by a few schools here, during CCE lessons to encourage reflection, build community in class, and strengthen relationships. Unlike traditional discussion groups, Circle Time emphasises honest dialogue, authentic sharing and confidentiality. In talking about sensitive issues, the sharing serves as a balm to soothe students’ souls.

“Everyone has to be clear that there is no judgement, that we respect other people’s opinions, and whatever we share in the circle remains in the circle,” shared Mrs Lie.

The teacher plays a crucial role here in creating a safe environment and prompting students to think about an issue by asking the right questions. This means being firm with ground rules such as getting students to take turns to speak, to listen when someone else is talking, and to keep the information shared confidential.

Pei Hwa Secondary School’s Mr Tan Aik Fong, Senior Teacher for Learning Needs (Educational Support), has started using the Circle Time technique to help Normal (Technical) class students work through confidence and self-esteem issues.


Form and Co-form teachers will typically run two separate circles – girls in one circle, and boys in another – as the sharing can get personal.

“In the circle, we got students to share the negative things people have said to them. They may have been told that they are hopeless and that they can’t study, or they are doomed to fail. Sometimes, it is their family that has said hurtful things to them,” he said.

The teachers then help them work through the negative emotions by teaching them to practice positive self-talk and positive thinking. Quotations from the students are then printed as posters to serve as visual reminders for the class.

Katong Convent’s Mrs Lie added that when students talk about their challenges and problems, they realise they are not alone. “They grow together and strengthen each other,” she shared.

Both teachers agree it is hard to measure the gains of Circle Time, as socio-emotional benefits are often subtle. Anecdotally, however, teachers have reported stronger class spirit, which helps nurture intrinsic motivation.

As students reflect on issues, Circle Time can turn into a restorative session that re-energises and prepares them to face any challenges. 

Power Up!

Writing math formulae into pop songs or using play to communicate with students – these courses will supercharge your classroom and personal wellbeing in 2018. They run over a couple of sessions, so you might have to make special arrangements to your classroom teaching to attend them. But as you plan your professional development for the year, this training guide could inspire you to think bolder...

Course name: Use of music in learning
Duration: 8 sessions x 1.5 hours
Training provider: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

We all know how difficult it is to get students to remember science theories, maths formulae and grammar rules. Yet they seem to be able to memorise song lyrics and melodies effortlessly – sometimes even songs in foreign languages! Music has been found to stimulate parts of the brain and enhance memory. And perhaps the way to get students to remember what they are taught is to weave those formulae into a song, or write the theories into a rap! This course will introduce learners to music therapy, and show them how they can incorporate music activities in the classroom.

Learn more about the course at
<http://bit.ly/MusicInLearning>



Course name: Astronauts, moon and stars:
 Playing and learning in the classroom
Duration: 2 sessions x 7.5 hours
Training provider: Science Centre Board

We see the moon every night and yet we know so little about it. Where did the moon come from? Theories of a full moon affecting human behaviour abound, but are they true? The vast blackness of space is beautiful and fascinating all at once. In this course, teachers learn how they can go beyond science textbooks and introduce space science – mysterious as it is – to young learners in fun and interesting ways. They will learn how to develop and facilitate space science-related lessons in the classroom using art and creative expressions.

Learn more about the course at
<http://bit.ly/ClassroomInSpace>



Course name: Introduction to play therapy**Duration: 2 sessions x 5.5 hours****Training provider: National University of Singapore**

Playing is more than just fun and games – it is an important tool that develops both children and grownups. Through play, we learn to communicate with others, persevere through challenges, and think quickly and creatively to solve problems. It also reduces stress and contributes to our overall wellbeing. This makes play an effective tool to manage classroom behaviours. In this course, educators will discover the play therapy process and how children communicate through the use of symbols and metaphors as they have fun.

Learn more about the course at <http://bit.ly/IntroToPlay>

**Course name: Helping youths cope with anger****Duration: 2 sessions x 7 hours****Training provider: Social Service Institute**

Being a teenager is hard, but teaching them can be harder. As children enter in teens, they emphasise freedom and autonomy, and enjoy spending time with friends. At this stage, they are more likely to cave in to peer pressure and engage in risky behaviours. Coupled with the changes in their bodies, they may become angry, rude and distant. This course will guide teachers on how they can help teenage students work through their emotions. Teachers will learn to identify reasons for anger, and spot anger triggers. They will also learn about effective problem-solving skills, and how they can help students resolve conflicts amicably.

Learn more about the course at <http://bit.ly/CopeWithAnger>

Course name: Mindfulness-based stress reduction**Duration: 8 sessions x 2.5 hours & 1 session x 6 hours****Training provider: Singapore Management University**

We all know that teachers do more than just teach. They listen to their students' problems and counsel them. They nurse and take care of students who are ill or who have hurt themselves. They plan and coordinate events so that students have the chance to head outside for field trips or external competitions. These demands can be overwhelming at times, and it is important that teachers know how to take care of themselves both mentally and physically. Mindfulness-based stress reduction is a programme aiming to reduce the physiological aspects of stress, and promote serenity and clarity in everyday life. Participants of this course will learn how to calm their minds and bodies by regulating their breathing and focusing on the present moment, as well as on the thoughts going through their minds.

Learn more about the course at <http://bit.ly/FocusOnPresent>



Dealing with first-day jitters



Primary 1 students learn about traffic rules as part of their orientation programme. Photo by Tampines North Primary School

Kindergarten to primary school, primary school to secondary school. The transition from one stage of education to another comes with its unique set of challenges. Four teachers share how they work with students and parents to overcome the anxiety and apprehension of Primary 1 and Secondary 1 transitions.

“If you bring in parents as partners and work with them, you get more help instead.”

– Mrs Usha Surendran, Year Head for P1 and P2, Townsville Primary School

PRIMARY 1: IT'S THE FIRST DAY FOR PARENTS, TOO

The first day of school for Primary 1 students can be both exciting and nerve-racking. They put on new uniforms, step into unfamiliar terrain and spend longer hours studying.

At the school gates, teachers witness scenes of anxiety. Children clinging to their parents in a “tug of war”, parents craning their necks and calling out to their children to get their attention, and saying goodbyes. Educators, almost universally, have one suggestion to help make the transition from kindergarten to primary school easier: Parents, relax and let go.

Mrs Marlene Kiw, Year Head for lower primary at **Tampines North Primary School**, noticed that parents seem even more anxious than their children during the first day of Primary 1.

“The students are mostly more excited and happy-go-lucky than feeling nervous. But parents, on the other hand, are jittery and asking ‘When is the timetable coming in? Is it coming in anytime now? When are you collecting the books?’” she quipped.

“When it comes to the first day of school, it is also about the readiness of parents. Parents must be ready to let go and trust that the school will take care of their children.”

Mrs Usha Surendran, Year Head for P1 and P2 at **Townsville Primary School**, shares the same sentiment. So the school decided to engage parents of Primary 1 students, communicating with them either through a blog, a Class Dojo mobile app, or a WhatsApp group.

“You will be surprised. If you bring in parents as partners and work with them, you get more help instead,” she said.

SEC 1: NEW FRIENDS, NEW EXPERIENCES

During tryouts for co-curricular activities (CCAs) at **Gan Eng Seng School** this year, English and Literature teacher Jake Ong invited a group of fresh-faced Secondary 1 students to try their hand at basketball.

There were just three students who were willing to participate in the activity at first. But he guided and encouraged the class, and by the end of the lesson, most were in the court shooting basketballs. It is one of many teachable moments for Mr Ong. Teachers need to be sensitive to these moments and encourage Secondary 1 students to overcome apprehension in a new environment, he noted.

The first day for Secondary 1 students may be daunting, as they come to terms with the fact that they have more choices and responsibilities, including having to decide which CCA to join. All students have to take part in one CCA, to help them discover their interests and talents and develop values, competencies and camaraderie.

As part of Secondary 1 orientation, **Gan Eng Seng School** allocates three days for CCA tryouts and trials -- designed to expose all students to a range of CCAs, from sports to performing arts.

“At their age, they may not be well aware to make informed choices. It's important to give them this space to explore,” said Mr Ong.



Since 2011, alumni of Bedok Green Secondary have been returning to conduct Camp SPRITE, an overnight orientation camp for new Secondary 1 students. Photo by Bedok Green Secondary School

To help new students adapt to secondary school life, **Bedok Green Secondary School** focuses on nurturing a culture of care and long-lasting friendships in school.

There are various platforms for interactions, so that the Secondary 1 students can build supportive relationships with their peers.


Teachers also use these opportunities to get to know the Secondary 1 students, with the aim of creating a close-knit Bedok Green Family.

The school's week-long orientation activities, for instance, are deliberately grouped around students' houses – Emerald, Sapphire, Topaz and Ruby – mixing up the various streams and classes.

There's also the overnight Camp SPRITE (which stands for Spirit of School, Pride, Responsibility, Integrity, Teamwork and Excellence) where alumni would return to run activities for the new students.

Madam Salenah Bte Mohamed Salleh, Assistant Year Head at **Bedok Green Secondary School**, said: "Even after graduation, many alumni continue to come back to help organise the camp. It has become part of our tradition and shows that we are doing something right in building this peer support culture in school, where students want to pass on their experiences to the new batches of students."

To create more interaction opportunities outside the classroom, the school has an After-School Engagement room named the Activities of Teenagers (AOT) Clubroom. Here, students can play board games, futsal and pool with their friends. This room also serves as a social hub for all **Bedok Green Secondary** students.

Madam Salenah added: "The culture of care within the school is the most important to develop... so students enjoy and like coming to school. Then, other things like academic and character development will, naturally, follow." 

Helping students feel S.A.F.E

Here are 4 quick steps to ease their anxiety and worries in school.

Support

Encourage them to make new friends, and show interest by chatting with them

Affirm

Recognise small successes, and praise their efforts.

Familiarise

Identify practical things they can experience in school.

Empathise

Acknowledge their feelings and encourage them to share their thoughts about their new experiences.

Good habits, great classrooms

We know you teachers try to build a positive environment, engage students and deliver strong lessons. Revisit these simple but effective strategies that can transform your class!

1 OPEN WITH ACTION

Begin your lesson with a five-minute activity to capture students' attention. It can be a riddle, a short game, or screening a quick video and asking them some questions after that. For instance, if the class is learning about Singapore's history, you could give them a pop quiz about how the national anthem came about. Or tell students a short story about Greek philosopher Pythagoras when they are learning about Pythagoras' theorem. When you start lessons with such activities, known as anticipatory sets in educator-speak, you hook students, whet their appetites and prepare them for the day's learning.



2 START A THANKFULNESS JAR

Practices to encourage gratitude often seem simple and basic. Yet, studies by University of California, Davis professor Robert Emmons, the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude, showed that those who practice gratitude are happier, more optimistic, and more resistant to stress. Gratitude is an emotion that strengthens relationships, as it shows us how we have been supported and affirmed by other people. In the classroom, gratitude is a powerful tool that creates a positive environment and build solidarity and inclusion. Encourage students to think about what they are thankful for in school by routinely getting them to write notes and dropping them into a gratitude jar. Every week, pick out a few notes and read them to the class when they need a pick-me-up.





3 SPARK REFLECTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Reflection makes learning more meaningful for students. In a book about educational psychology, *Make It Stick*, writers and psychologists Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III and Mark A. McDaniel describe reflection as a rigorous process that makes it more likely for students to absorb and master what they are learning. Students recall what they have learnt recently, connect that knowledge to what they already know, and rephrase key ideas in their own words or visually. These actions lead to stronger learning, more so than common study habits such as highlighting key words in textbooks and rereading them many times over. Make reflection a core component of students' learning process by getting them to write one-minute notes before and after an activity or a discussion. This way, students are encouraged to assess their understanding of a topic, which reinforces learning.

4 PRAISE YOUR STUDENTS (IN MODERATION!)

Praise, when done well, is an effective motivator to boost students' academic or behavioural performances. It tells students that you approve of their actions and that they have met your expectations. Yet research suggests that praise is underused in general education classrooms. Make it a point to praise students by coming up with a list of four to five names each week, and singling them out for praise. The praise should describe a noteworthy behaviour of the student and should acknowledge effort and accomplishment, instead of ability. So instead of saying "You are so good in maths! Keep it up!", say something like "I can tell from your answers that you worked hard to prepare for this test. Good job!". But praise has to be done in moderation – if given too effusively, the praise loses its meaning and ceases to be effective.



5 STRETCH, BREATHE AND RELAX

With the demands of school work, co-curricular activities and social relationships, life can feel overwhelming for students. While some stress can facilitate students' learning, it can also trigger anxiety and depression if not managed well. This may lead to behavioural issues such as social withdrawal and angry outbursts. Scientists have found that stress, like a flu virus, is very much contagious. Just being around and observing people who are stressed out is enough to make our bodies release the stress hormone cortisol. Maintaining a positive classroom environment is key to reducing student stress. Set aside time in your lessons for quick activities such as getting students to stand up and stretch, or let them quieten down and breathe deeply and slowly. These simple acts help freshen their minds and release tension in their bodies. [C](#)



Students Say the Cutest Things

We spoke to our colleagues and gathered these hilarious and heartening comments made by their students - you'll laugh and cry a little!

1

Thanks for teaching us lots of things such as Science.
But that is not all.

You also teach us values such as respect and compassion . . .

You are like a third parent to us.

- Primary School Student

3

You are cool,
awesome, and fabulous!
Even I am not as
fabulous as you!

- Secondary School Student

2

Sometimes I really wonder how you manage to stay funny yet powerful at the same time.

- Secondary School Student

4

You have been a wonderful teacher!
I am curious about a thing
- don't you get bored of maths?

- Primary School Student



5

We are selfish, please don't blame us. You don't belong to another class, you belong to us.

- Secondary School Student

6

Thank you for helping me to improve in my English. I appreciate it and wish that you can still teach us again next year. Sometimes, no - every time - I will be such a chatterbox in class. But I will try to be more attentive.

Sometimes, my memory is not that good so I will forget to do homework. Sorry...

- Primary School Student

7

Thank you for making me so clever. You are so kind.

- Primary School Student

100


8

You are the best story teller in the whole Milky Way galaxy. I love your real-life stories. You inspire us while you tell them. I wish you will teach us next year.

- Primary School Student

9

Thanks for helping me improve in maths. I will not forget that. Remember that time you asked me how I improved?

The real answer is YOU. Sorry I did not tell you the true answer because I was too shy! 

- Primary School Student

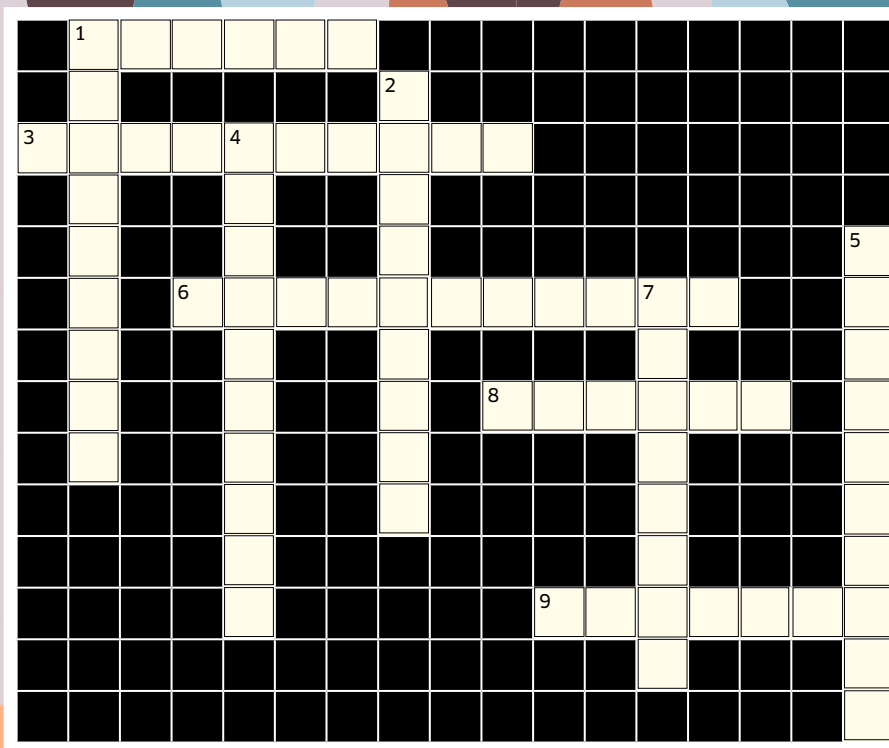
Do you have more student quips to share?

Write to us at contact_online@moe.edu.sg

ANSWER & WIN!

Can you
solve this?

Show us how well you read Contact by tackling this puzzle (answers can be found within the magazine). Three correct entries will be chosen to receive an attractive prize each!



ACROSS →

- To motivate students, one method is to give _____, which is effective if done in moderation.
- At CHIJ Katong Convent, students arrange themselves in two _____ circles during sharing sessions.
- The ambient and background sounds in cafes are termed _____.
- Bedok Green Secondary School holds an annual overnight camp for Secondary 1 students called Camp _____.
- Napping has been found to prevent _____ among students.

DOWN ↓

- _____ behaviour is when people act in a manner that benefits society at large.
- Research conducted by the University of California shows that those who practise _____ are often happier.
- _____ are the chemicals produced by the brain, which are released during exercise.
- Overprotective parents are also known as _____ parents.
- The Social Service Institute offers a course on helping youths identify reasons for their anger, as well as their _____.

Winners from last issue's puzzle



Mr Mohamed Somsadeen
Guangyang Secondary School
Teacher

Mrs Choong Lay Len
Juying Secondary School
Teacher

Mdm Tang Weng Yee
Northbrooks Secondary School
Senior Teacher

Congratulations!

**THINK YOU HAVE
THE ANSWERS?**

Send a clear photo of your completed entry to contact_online@moe.edu.sg by **30 April 2018**. Please include your full name, institution, designation, NRIC and contact number in your email.