Teaching High School Students

Purpose: This resource provides strategies for designing motivating, developmentally appropriate, and well-structured learning experiences for high school students in our [Pre-College Program](#) and [Secondary School Program](#). It balances formal instruction with active experimentation and interest-based exploration, recognizing the unique developmental needs of adolescent learners.

Why and How do High Schoolers Learn?

High school students are developing their academic skills, independence, and self-awareness, but they still require clear structure, guidance, and modeling from instructors. Research on adolescent learning highlights three key drivers of engagement:

1. **Clear Purpose and Motivation**
   Students are more engaged when they understand *why* the content matters and how it connects to their future goals.

2. **Structured Exploration of Interests**
   Adolescents benefit from teacher-led opportunities to explore topics that connect to their personal passions.

3. **Active Experimentation and Community**
   Learning is deepened through collaborative, hands-on experiences and a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Steps for Implementation

1. **Get to Know Your Students**
   Begin by learning about students' prior knowledge, skills, and interests. This builds rapport, informs instructional choices, and helps create a classroom community.

   a. **Structured Introductions**
      Use guided prompts such as "Share your name, one interest, and one goal for this class."

   b. **Interest Surveys**
      Have students complete a short survey on their favorite subjects, hobbies, and learning preferences.

c. Low-Stakes Sharing Activities
Use short writing prompts or pair discussions before class presentations to build confidence.

2. **Communicate Learning Goals and Expectations Clearly**
High school students benefit from explicit directions and consistent expectations.

    a. Share course learning goals at the start of the term and daily learning objectives at the start of each lesson.

    b. Use student-friendly language for expectations (e.g., "By the end of class today, you should be able to…").

    c. Provide models or examples of successful work.

3. **Balance Formal Instruction with Active Learning**
Adolescents need both teacher-led instruction and opportunities to apply concepts through hands-on activities.

    a. Use mini-lessons (10–15 minutes) followed by guided practice.

    b. Incorporate active experimentation such as labs, simulations, debates, or role-plays.

    c. Build in scaffolded group projects that increase independence over time.

4. **Co-Create Community Agreements**
High school classrooms thrive on mutual respect and clear boundaries.

    a. Prompt students: "How do we want to treat each other in this class? How do we handle disagreements respectfully?"

    b. Document agreements, post them visibly, and revisit them periodically.

5. **Provide Frequent Feedback and Check-Ins**
Younger learners benefit from regular opportunities to assess their progress.

    a. Use quick formative assessments (exit tickets, short quizzes, polls).

    b. Build peer feedback into projects using clear rubrics and sentence starters ("One thing I liked… One question I have…").

   c. Schedule midpoint check-ins on long-term projects.

6. **Support Reflection and Goal-Setting**
   Help students build metacognitive skills by reflecting on their learning.

   a. Ask students to set personal goals at the start of a unit.

   b. Include short reflective prompts at the end of lessons ("What's one thing you learned today?").

   c. Celebrate progress toward goals as well as final outcomes.

Instructor Planning Guide

1. How will I balance structured instruction with opportunities for active experimentation?

2. How will I scaffold assignments so students can work independently by the end of the term?

3. How will I assess student understanding frequently and adjust instruction?

4. How will I connect course content to students' lives and interests?

Instructor Checklist

☐ I provided clear goals and expectations for the course and each lesson.

☐ I built activities that connect to students' interests.

☐ I balanced teacher-led instruction with active, hands-on learning.

☐ I established and reinforced community agreements.

☐ I included frequent check-ins and formative assessments.

☐ I encouraged student reflection and goal setting.

Resource

[College Programs for High School Students](#) (Harvard DCE)