Building Student Self-Efficacy

Classroom strategies organized by Bandura's four sources, with an observation checklist

For: K-12 teachers, counselors and instructional coaches

What self-efficacy is

Self-efficacy is a student's belief that they can succeed at a specific task: not "I'm smart" but "I can solve this kind of problem." Albert Bandura identified four sources of that belief: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. Mastery experiences are the strongest source. The strategies below are grouped by source. Pick one from each group, run them for three weeks, and track one behavior from the checklist at the end. Grade bands: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12.

Source 1: Mastery experiences (students' own successes)

Sequence for early wins

Open each unit with a task every student can complete with effort, then raise difficulty in small steps. The first experience sets the baseline. *Grade band:* All. Make the progression visible for 6-12.

Proximal goals

Break the unit goal into sub-goals reachable within a lesson or a week. Each one met is a mastery experience. *Grade band:* 3-12; K-2 use a progress strip.

Evidence-of-growth folder

Students keep dated work samples. Review at unit boundaries and ask: "What can you do now that you couldn't do then?" *Grade band:* All. Teacher curates in K-2.

Repair and reattempt

After a failed task, find the exact step that broke, reteach it, and give a similar task soon after. The repaired success is stronger than the original would have been. *Grade band:* All.

Mastery checkpoints

Let students demonstrate a skill when ready, against a clear standard, rather than on a single date. *Grade band:* 3-12.

Source 2: Vicarious experiences (watching similar others succeed)

Peer models who struggled first

Ask a student who worked through a difficulty to show how, including the dead ends. *Grade band:* 3-12; in K-2 the teacher narrates a peer's progress with permission.

Model as a learner

When demonstrating, include pauses, checks and corrections. Never-stuck teachers teach students that being stuck is abnormal. *Grade band:* All.

Before-and-after samples

Show anonymous earlier and later work from past students on the same skill. *Grade band:* 3-12.

Near-peer tutoring

Pair students so the tutor is slightly ahead, not far ahead, and give the tutor a script. *Grade band:* 3-12.

Source 3: Social persuasion (credible, specific feedback)

Reference demonstrated capability

"You used this strategy Tuesday and it worked. Try it here." Tie encouragement to evidence the student already has. *Grade band:* All.

Attribute success to controllable causes

Name the strategy or effort: "You slowed down and checked each step." Avoid "That one was easy" or "You're a natural." *Grade band:* All.

Next-step feedback

Every substantial piece of work gets one thing that is working and one specific next step. A score alone does not build efficacy. *Grade band:* All; one next step only in K-2.

No hollow reassurance

"You'll be fine" before a task the student then fails costs credibility. If they are not ready, say what readiness requires. *Grade band:* All.

Source 4: Physiological and emotional states (how students read their bodies)

Pre-task reset

Slow exhale, name the feeling, name the first step. Practice during low-stakes work until automatic. *Grade band:* All; pair with a physical cue in K-2.

Reframe arousal

Teach that nervousness before hard work is the body preparing, not a prediction. Notice it and begin. *Grade band:* 6-12 especially.

Reduce avoidable stressors

Clear instructions, no surprise assessments, no public comparison, no time pressure that is not part of the skill. *Grade band:* All.

Language that builds efficacy

Instead of	Say
"You're so smart."	"You chose a strategy and stuck with it. That's what got you here."
"That one was easy."	"You made that look easy because you've practiced it."

Instead of	Say
"You'll be fine."	"You've done the first two steps before. The third is new. Here's how it connects."
"Don't worry about it."	"Feeling nervous means you care. Take a breath and start with step one."
"Good job."	"Your explanation of the first step is clear. Next, show the check."

Observation checklist

Observe a focus group of four to six students, or the whole class, for one week before you start and again after three weeks. Mark each behavior as rarely, sometimes or often.

Behavior	Before	After
Chooses the harder option when offered a choice		
Starts work within one minute of the task being set		
Continues working after an error without being prompted		
Asks specific questions ("I'm stuck on step 3") rather than general ones ("I don't get it")		
Attributes results to strategy or effort rather than luck or ability		
Uses the pre-task reset before assessments without being told		
Refers to past successes when facing new work		
Sets a goal that is specific and reachable		
Persists on a task for the full allotted time		
Volunteers to share work or thinking		

Student self-rating (before and after a unit)

On a scale of 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (very confident), how sure are you that you can:

1 _____ (task 1 from this unit) 1 2 3 4 5
2 _____ (task 2) 1 2 3 4 5
3 _____ (task 3) 1 2 3 4 5

4 Explain how you solved a problem to a classmate 1 2 3 4 5
5 Keep going when the first attempt does not work 1 2 3 4 5

Compare the before and after ratings against the observation checklist. A student whose ratings rise while behaviors stay the same needs more mastery experiences, not more encouragement.

Three-week starter plan

- **Week 1:** Early win at the start of the unit; start the evidence folder; switch all feedback to capability-plus-next-step.
- **Week 2:** First peer model who struggled; teach the pre-task reset before a low-stakes quiz.
- **Week 3:** Proximal goal for the week; run the observation checklist again; students compare folders to September.

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