

# Positive Notes

Ideas for Finding Connection and Celebration  
in the Midst of COVID-19

From Nancy Steineke, author of *Classroom Management: Strategies for Achievement, Cooperation, and Engagement*.

A Note  
from  
Nancy Steineke



## IN THE PAST FEW DAYS, MANY OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF DISTANCE LEARNING HAVE COME TO LIGHT.

While technological impoverishment is one very real problem, another is that students just aren't logging on for their e-lessons. Rather than taking this "apathy" personally, we need to view this behavior through a different lens. If you've been depressed and frightened by the ever changing disease updates, imagine how teenagers must feel knowing that their adult futures might look very different than what they ever imagined. And all students—and adults—are constantly worried about the health and safety of parents, siblings, and others close to them. Finally, families are either facing stressful stay-at-home edicts or parents/guardians continue to work, leaving older students to manage households and look after younger siblings. These combined circumstances leave the brain stressed, depressed, and frazzled. Our students might look to our distance learning offerings and conclude, "What's the point? I can't even predict what tomorrow will bring."

So what can we teachers do that might make a difference? Reconnect and celebrate with students and parents by writing some positive notes to them. Though you most likely haven't seen your students since mid-March, you did get to work with them for about two-thirds of the school year or two months of the second semester. You do know them! Grab your class list(s) and a pack of index cards or scratch pad paper. Put one student's name on each card and then jot down every positive thing you can think of about that student. If you get stuck, imagine you are a proud grandparent bragging about that student on Facebook!

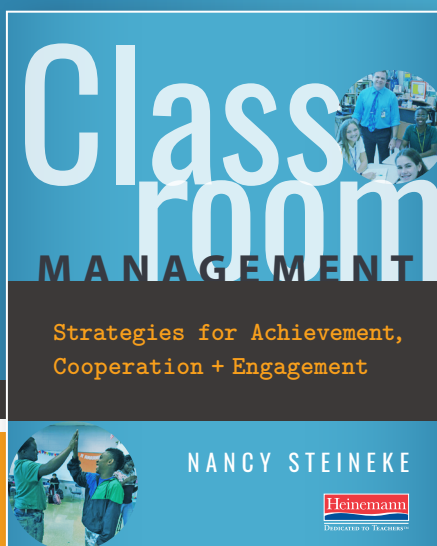
Then, once you've got your cards ready, start sending out those notes: text, email, school communication system, snail mail postcards. The mode of communication might be different from family to family. Pick the communication method that will best reach each student. For younger students, address your note to the parents/guardians. For older students, send your celebratory message directly to them and copy the parents/guardians. Send a note to EVERY student, whether or not you have heard from them since your school's closure.

More specific guidance in regards to the kinds of details to include in your notes, pacing your note writing, and keeping track of the notes you write is included in the following pages, "Observe a Success and Document It in a Positive Note," from *Classroom Management: Strategies for Achievement, Cooperation, and Engagement*.

Finally, in these uncertain times, everyone is overwhelmed, so don't be surprised if your notes receive no response, no thanks, no acknowledgement. Instead of feeling slighted, keep the focus on your students and know that your notes did make a difference, creating a positive moment for each one of them.

All my best,

Nancy



Learn more about *Classroom Management* at [Heinemann.com](http://Heinemann.com).



Connect with Nancy on Twitter @nsteineke.



## MOVE> Observe a Success and Document It in a Positive Note

**Immediate Result:** From day one, being on the lookout for shareable student successes reframes your orientation for what you notice and remember. Rather than zooming in on student misbehavior and deficiency (a natural tendency because *this* was the type of teaching so often modeled in our own years as students), we actively work to retrain ourselves to zoom in on what students are doing well, redefining deficiencies as areas for potential growth. Additionally, your students get a happy surprise when they hear that you've sent a positive note to their families.

**Long-Term Result:** Each positive note you send a family about a student affirms their successful guidance as well as the potential of a child they love—a great way to build a trusting relationship. Additionally, a positive note creates a bridge between family and teacher. That note fosters a first impression that you are paying attention to your students and know them as individuals. As a result, students are more likely to view you as an ally than as an adversary.

Stop for a second and think about the time it takes to hammer out a “bad news” email or make a “bad news” phone call. And then think about how effective those communications are overall. When we connect with families over a negative issue, there's almost always an underlying tension that remains in that relationship as this less-than-spectacular story becomes part of your shared history. Even if the issue is eventually resolved, no one in the story feels particularly satisfied. So, instead of initiating contact when a problem arises, how about initiating contact daily with some good news?

At the end of each day, set a goal for yourself to jot off positive messages to the parents or guardians of five of your students: emails, handwritten and mailed notes, text messages, or messages sent through your school's learning management system. While you might choose a phone message, a piece of writing is more tangible and harder to forget or overlook. It can be printed out and reread. Detail specific observations of positive ways each student participated and contributed to class. The notes

don't have to be long: five or six sentences, maybe one hundred words. Eventually, every student's family will receive one, but start with the students who might need a little shot of positivity the most.

As you work to hit that five-note-a-day goal, it will make you a better kid-watcher. For some kids, you'll find it's super easy to collect positive anecdotes, but for others you'll sometimes come up empty. Don't give up or feel frustrated—just push yourself a little harder to pay attention to the kids who are quiet as well as the ones who get your attention because of their frequent need for redirection. And that's when you'll begin to see those students whom you might previously have labeled “disruptive” in a completely new light. Disruptive students aren't disruptive all the time. As a matter of fact, lots of times they are following directions and contributing positively to class. Unfortunately, because we teachers expect perfection 100 percent of the time, we get blinded by that narrowly focused lens. Once you readjust your point of view, you'll have lots of success stories to write home about for every student.

So what would these notes look like? Here are a couple of examples:

Hello Mrs. Galla,

I just wanted to drop a quick note to tell you about Henry's contribution in class today. As I was observing him in his table group discussing the causes of the Civil War, Henry noticed one member who was pretty quiet. First, he nudged his partner and quietly checked to see if she was feeling okay. Then, since she was, he reentered the discussion, but when there was a pause, he said, “We haven't heard what Susan thinks. Let's listen to her now.” And Susan shared some great ideas, ideas that no one would have heard if it hadn't been for Henry!

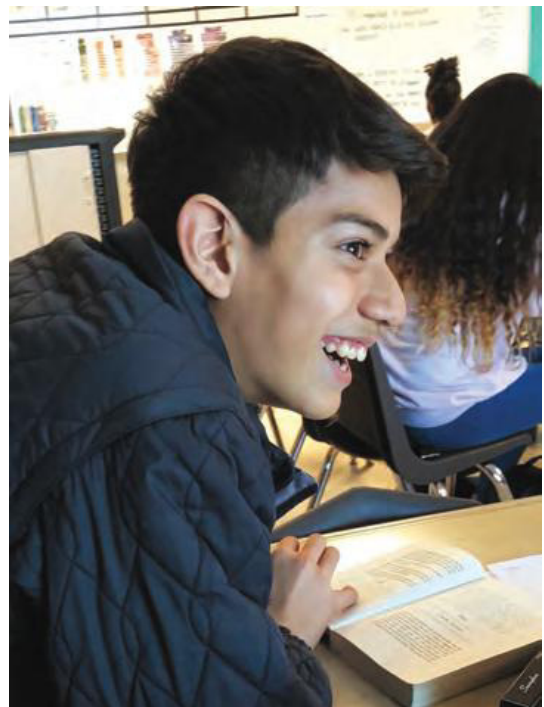
Hello Mr. Smith,

As we are finishing up our unit on *Othello*, I just wanted to let you know what a fantastic job Ron did interpreting his lines and playing Iago. Not only were his lines perfectly memorized, but so was his blocking. Everyone in the room loved his performance, applauding wildly when the scene was concluded. Ron certainly showed everyone he has a hidden talent for acting. I am so happy that I was able to video record his performance because I know it will inspire future classes as they work on perfecting their own *Othello* scene performances.

When you take a look at both of these notes, notice the specific recipe pieces:

1. The note describes a specific anecdote, detailing exactly what the student said or did.
2. If possible, the note also includes how this student's actions affected another student or the class positively.
3. The note makes absolutely no mention of previous problems or deficiencies. Its entire purpose is to celebrate a classroom success that the student generated under their own power.

For almost every note, you'll find that families are effusively appreciative. These emails break the ice and create a strong bond. We teachers might not realize it, but middle school and high school can be confusing times for parents and guardians. When children are in elementary school, parents and guardians have to maintain contact with only one or two teachers. The departmentalization of middle school and high school can overwhelm parents and guardians: now a student might have six or seven different teachers. A positive email builds a bridge between you and a parent or guardian, and it demonstrates that their child isn't just one more student in your classroom; you know them as an individual. Also, if you print out a copy of the email, it's a nice way to build a bond with students as well. At the end of class, catch the student at the door, hand them the email printout, and say, "Hey, I thought you might enjoy reading this. It's great having you in class. Thanks!" (see Figure 5.14).



**Figure 5.14** When students know their teacher notices and acknowledges their successes, they enter the room in a positive, cooperative mind frame, ready to enjoy class.

Now, you might still be thinking, “It might take me 5 minutes a note. Where am I going to find an extra 25 minutes per day outside class?” Try taking a close look at

- **Grading:** Are you seeing positive results from copious notes on drafts, or do you see more progress in a conference with a student during class time? Do *all* your quizzes need to be graded by you rather than by your students? Does *every* small assignment need a grade? Teach your students how to accurately self-evaluate and set goals for themselves (see Chapter 4, page 154), and you’ll find that you have more time to focus on positive contact with families.
- **Negative contact with families:** If you are spending an inordinate amount of time getting in contact with families over negative issues, consider how productive that time has been. Has it resulted in positive change or in stress and antagonizing conversations? Switching gears to focus on positives when contacting families could go a long way toward making calls about negative issues unnecessary (see Figure 5.15).

Student Name	Date Contacted	Contact Method	Message Summary
Anders, Steve	8.31	email	Kudos—invited others into conversation, tries even if he's wrong
Anders, Steve	12.17	email	Great attitude during stressful end-of-semester time, good responsibility reading the morning announcements
Craigs, Carrie	8.27	email	Kudos—great responsibility and enthusiasm for the school year (making to-do list, crossing things off)
Craigs, Carrie	8.29	email	Advisory intro & kudos for a great start to the year, helping a classmate write with broken wrist
Craigs, Carrie	12.1	email	Great Q2 essay—well done weaving texts and opinions together
Craigs, Carrie	12.14	email	Responsible, good writer
David, Alejandro	8.27	email	Advisory intro & kudos for great start to the year
David, Alejandro	9.13	email	Great start to the year—showing responsibility, hard work completing HW, 100 on signpost quiz, organized, diligent
Edwards, Imani	8.31	email	Advisory intro & good start to the year
Edwards, Imani	12.1	email	Great Q2 essay—impressive playing with quoting authors and stretching writing
Edwards, Imani	12.14	email	Great writing, nice work with a classmate on grammar
Grens, Dorothy	11.29	email	Kudos—great job trying Shakespeare out loud and asking questions/participating
Grens, Dorothy	12.12	email	Good job improving behavior and good essay grade for Q2 essay (95)
Grens, Dorothy	12.14	email	Great student—active participant—good writer
Germanotta, Angie	8.27	email	Advisory intro & kudos for a great start to the year
Germanotta, Angie	8.31	email	Kudos—awesome summer reading assignment
Germanotta, Angie	9.12	email	Low PR1 grade (68) due to missing summer reading assignment
Germanotta, Angie	11.29	email	Kudos—great average (90) and wonderful attitude in class
Germanotta, Angie	12.7	email	Joy to have in class! So polite and so kind.
Germanotta, Angie	12.12	email	Great job reading Shakespeare aloud with energy and emotion!
Gonzalez, Larry	8.27	email	Welcome & kudos—eager to learn, great help to new students, good responsibility
Gonzalez, Larry	8.31	email	Kudos—great work on summer reading assignment
Gonzalez, Larry	9.12	email	Great to have in class! Interest in grammar, positive personality.
Gonzalez, Larry	11.1	email	Follow up to conversation with student (went well) & natural conversation later in class
Gonzalez, Larry	11.31	BB game	Great drive to do well! Nice recent homework.
Gonzalez, Larry	12.12	email	Great energy in class
Moore, Jasmine	8.27	email	Advisory intro & great start to the year
Moore, Jasmine	9.12	email	Low PR1 grade (65)
Moore, Jasmine	10.1	email	Good energy & focus after school holiday
Moore, Jasmine	10.12	email	Improvements with vocab work--on track to see higher grades
Moore, Jasmine	11.8	email	Low PR2 grade (67)
Moore, Jasmine	11.29	email	Good dedication to making S1 essay really good; nice focus
Moore, Jasmine	11.31	email	Great personality and upbeat spirit (esp. with grammar work)
Moore, Jasmine	12.13	email	Great attitude, responsibility—able to separate social and academic focus
Moore, Jasmine	12.14	email	Good work in class on final essay. Hoping she brings paragraphs at study hall to get feedback.

**Figure 5.15** Seventh-grade teacher Lauren Huddleston always resolved to write positive emails, but noticed her follow-through fell by the wayside around October. Instead of losing momentum again, Lauren kept herself accountable by setting up a parent contact spreadsheet. Each entry included the date, contact method, and a summary of the message, green for positive and red for negative. Now Lauren was able to quickly review her contacts' home so that no one was left out.