

# **The Modern Classrooms Project: Doubling High-Quality Academic Feedback for Middle School Students**

## **Executive Summary**

What is the biggest obstacle to giving middle schoolers high-quality feedback on their academic work? It's simple: time. Between lecturing, managing behavior, and trying to keep classes full of diverse learners engaged, the average middle school teacher rarely has the time to give 80-100 students the personalized feedback they all need.

But what if the middle school classroom itself was redesigned, so that the teacher could spend the vast majority of class time providing individualized feedback directly to students? What if teachers no longer had to waste their precious time lecturing, or demanding that students sit still, or delivering lessons that were simultaneously too hard for some learners and too easy for others? What if the typical middle school teacher suddenly had the capacity to deliver high-quality feedback throughout each and every class period?

At The Modern Classrooms Project, we don't see these as theoretical questions. In fact, we've built a blended, self-paced, mastery-based instructional model that gives our teachers exactly this capacity. We run a yearly fellowship in which we train and support our fellow educators in low-income communities as they redesign their classrooms around our innovative instructional model. We've demonstrated our training's positive impacts on both students and teachers, built a community of change-making educators across Washington, DC, and heard from thousands of educators worldwide who are eager to join our movement. We have a model that can transform middle school instruction to ensure that every student receives personalized and actionable feedback every day. What we need is the financial backing to share this work with the world.

Want to give middle school students more feedback? Then train teachers to transform their classrooms into places where feedback is not an add-on to the learning experience but instead is the very heart and soul of the learning experience.

## **The Problem**

The Modern Classrooms project aims to solve a problem that is both simple and pervasive: the failure of traditional classroom practices, particularly in low-income communities, to meet students' needs. We address this problem by empowering individual educators to adopt blended, self-paced, mastery-based teaching practices that help all students, regardless of background, truly learn.

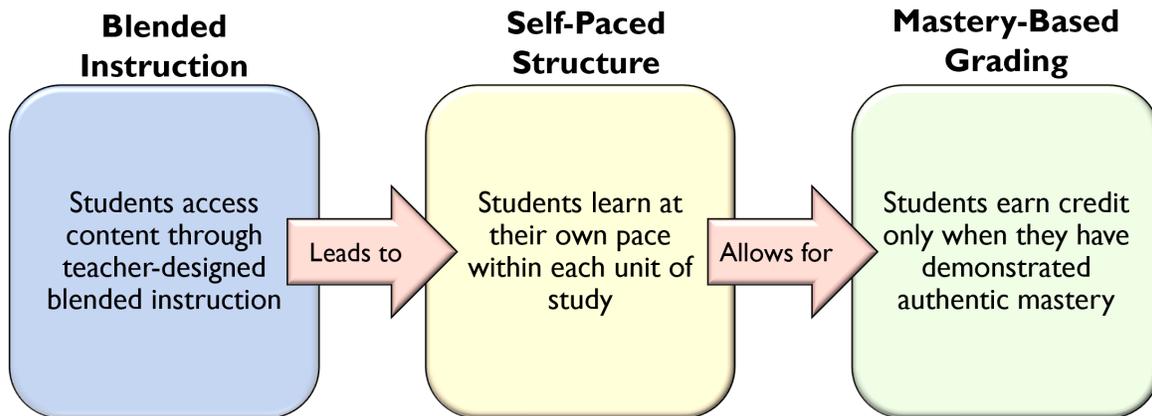
Why do so many classrooms fail their students? It's because most operate under a flawed premise: all students must learn at the same pace as their peers regardless of prerequisite skills. This traditional, one-size-fits-all approach limits teachers' ability to meet each student's unique learning needs. Courses that inevitably move too fast for some students will be too slow for others; low-performing students become lost while high performers grow disengaged. Teachers, meanwhile, are so consumed by the challenges of lecturing and behavior management that they have little capacity to provide personalized or actionable feedback to students.

These problems are especially severe in low-income schools like the ones in which I've spent my career teaching. In DC Public Schools, for instance, 77% of students are economically disadvantaged and 36% are chronically absent.<sup>1</sup> With a traditional approach to instruction, meeting the needs of all these students feels almost impossible.

The result of this flawed system, is that, nationwide, only 34% of 8th graders are proficient in math, and 36% in reading;<sup>2</sup> these figures are even lower in the marginalized communities we serve.<sup>3</sup> Teaching in this system is frustrating too: over 30% of teachers in high-risk communities leave their schools every three years, in large part because they feel unsuccessful in the classroom.<sup>4</sup>

## **Our Solution**

The Modern Classrooms Project empowers middle and high school educators to redesign their classrooms, using an instructional model built on three fundamental principles:



Through our Modern Classrooms Fellowship, we train teachers during an intensive one-week summer workshop, to build student-ready units that are blended, self-paced, and mastery-based. Just as importantly, we follow and support each Fellow throughout the school year, conducting regular classroom observations and providing targeted feedback to each of our Fellows. When necessary, we also provide the classroom technology that our Fellows need to implement our model.

Teacher feedback on our training -- which we've designed using the same blended, self-paced, mastery-based practices we preach -- has been overwhelmingly positive.

<sup>1</sup> "DC Public Schools Annual Truancy Report." DC Public Schools, September 2018.

[https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/page\\_content/attachments/FinalAttendanceReport%20SY1718\\_1.pdf](https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/page_content/attachments/FinalAttendanceReport%20SY1718_1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "NAEP Report Cards - Home." The Nation's Report Card, accessed October 2019. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>

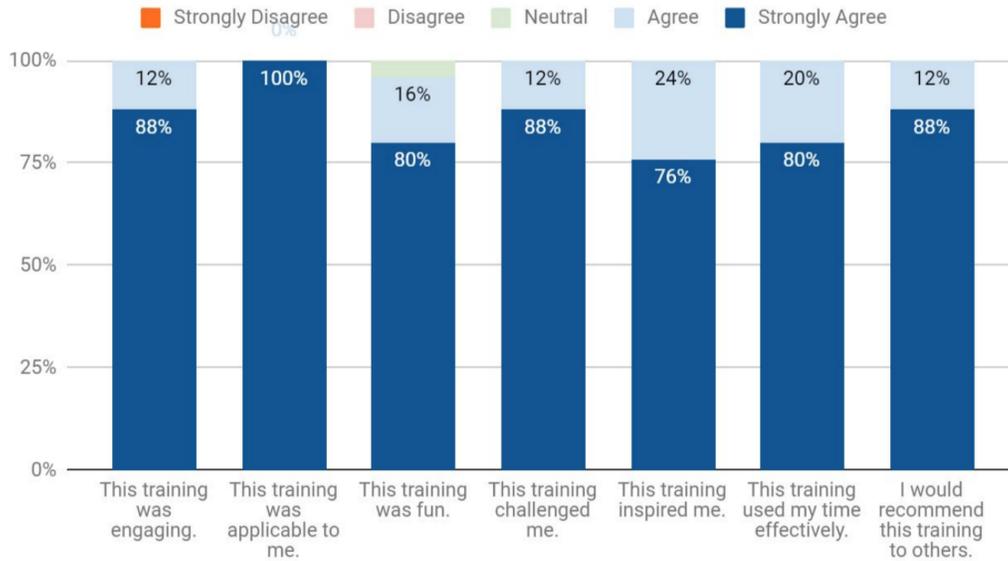
<sup>3</sup> "DC Public Schools Releases 2018 PARCC Scores, Showing Steady Gains Across All Grade Levels." DC Public Schools, 16 Aug. 2018, <https://dcps.dc.gov/release/dc-public-schools-releases-2018-parcc-scores-showing-steady-gains-across-all-grade-levels>.

<sup>4</sup> The figure for Washington, DC, is even higher at 25%. "DC SBOE Teacher Turnover Report"

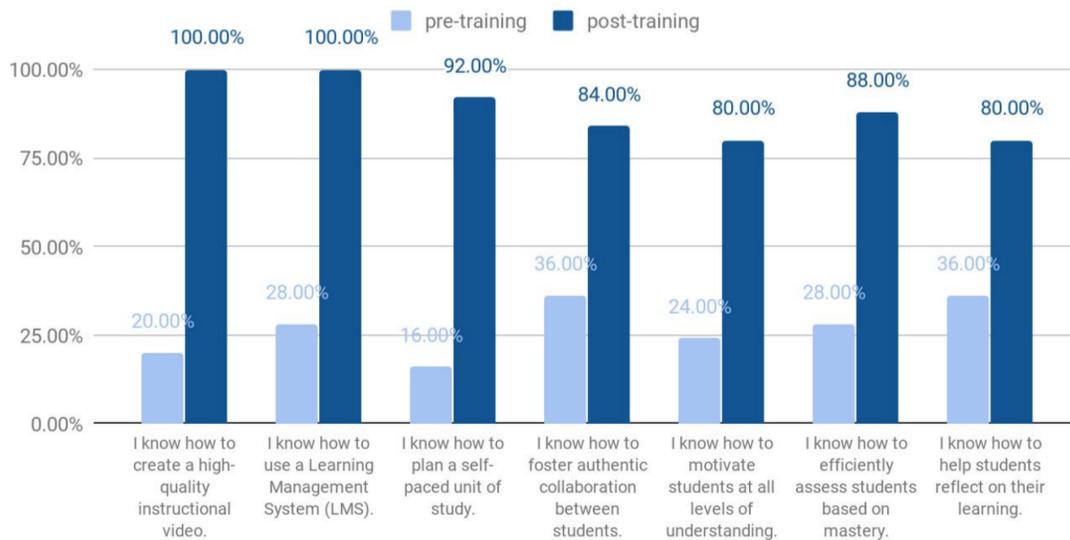
<https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/SBOE%20Teacher%20Turnover%20Report%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

Below is a snapshot of the feedback from the 25 Modern Classroom Fellows we trained this summer:<sup>5</sup>

### Teacher Feedback on Modern Classrooms Training (Summer 2019)



### % Agreement with Statements about Teaching, before and after Modern Classrooms Training (Summer 2019)



<sup>5</sup> A complete summary of feedback from our summer training, including quotes from participants, is available [here](#).

In total, it costs us \$3,000 to train and support each Modern Classrooms Fellow:

- \$1,000 stipend paid to each Fellow after effective completion of our summer training.
- \$1,000 invested in each Fellow for video-creation technology, educational software licenses, and year-round programming.
- \$1,000 award paid to each Fellow after effectively implementing a Modern Classroom for one full semester.

Since founding The Modern Classrooms Project in 2018, we have trained and supported a total of 33 educators in 10 middle and high schools across DC and Northern Virginia.

**Whom Do We Serve?**

For our first year of operation in school year 2018-2019, we trained seven high school educators and one middle school educator. Although we first developed our instructional model as high school teachers, we were blown away by the impact it made on our first middle school Fellow. In our second year of operation (school year 2019-2020), we made a targeted expansion into middle schools: 9 of our 25 new Fellows are middle school teachers. In total, our 10 middle school Fellows now teach approximately 800 students at the following three schools:

|   | <b>DC International School (Charter)</b> | <b>Hardy MS (DC Public Schools)</b> | <b>Patrick Henry MS (Alexandria City Public Schools)</b> |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>% Free and Reduced Lunch</b>               | 52%                                      | 30%                                 | 76%  |
| <b>% Students of Color</b>                    | 85%                                      | 73%                                 | 88%  |
| <b>% Receiving Special Education Services</b> | 15%                                      | 15%                                 | 9%   |
| <b>% English Language Learners</b>            | 8%                                       | 6%                                  | 36%  |

These demographics highlight the diversity of the schools where our educators work, and of the students they serve. While we believe that our model and training can improve the learning experiences of students at any school, our mission is to continue focusing on schools that serve large proportions of minority and economically disadvantaged students. We've spent our careers teaching in schools like these, and we know both the extent of the need and the impact which our work can make.

### **How Are We Innovative?**

We are far from the only organization to identify these problems, or attempt to harness technology to individualize students' experiences. However, we are unique because we:

- **Go Directly to Teachers:** Many educational innovations are imposed on teachers, who may or may not buy in. This leads to uneven implementation and considerable frustration on the part of educators -- and often their students -- who are forced to adopt practices which they did not choose and do not endorse. Unlike these top-down reform efforts, we don't force our model on anyone; instead, we work in close collaboration with teachers who actively want to implement it. Our training is built to support any teacher with an appetite for change, and the work ethic to make it happen.
- **Empower Rather than Replace Educators:** Some leaders in education technology, like Khan Academy and Summit Learning, seem to believe that they can change classroom instruction with pre-made instructional content and computer-generated assessments alone. However, students don't like cookie-cutter videos, and teachers don't like feeling replaced. Knowing that the educator is the most important agent of change in any classroom, we provide our teachers with a customizable instructional delivery model designed to retain each teacher's authenticity.<sup>6</sup> Our Fellows build their own instructional videos, maintain their own learning management systems, and decide what instructional shifts are necessary in their unique context. Our goal is to amplify and empower educators, not replace them.
- **Support Educators All Year Round:** Many professional development programs offer great workshops or ideas, but few follow through with teachers as they implement what they've learned. This leads to uneven implementation, as well as considerable frustration among teachers who have no one to troubleshoot or share ideas with. Ongoing support and consultation are at the core of our model. We observe our teachers regularly, offering them targeted feedback and providing whatever support they request or need.

### **How Do We Know Our Model Works?**

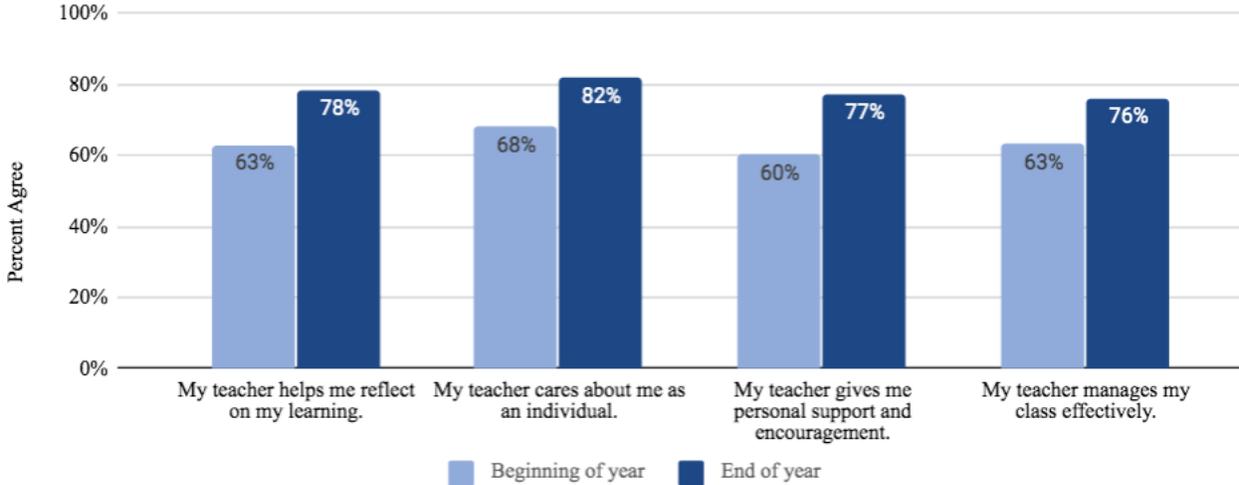
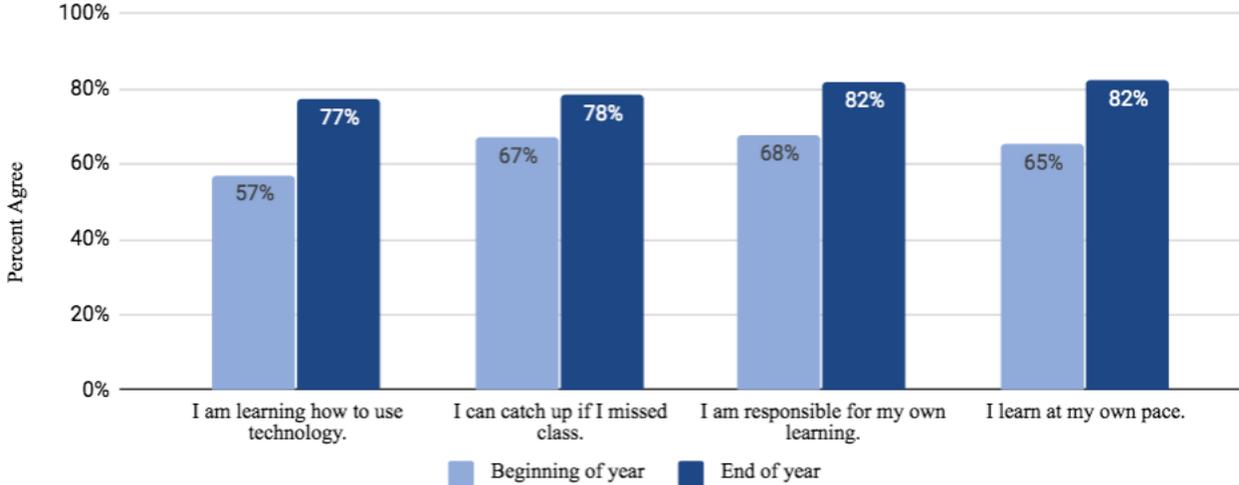
Research is at the heart of what we do. Our practices are informed by three primary sources of evidence:

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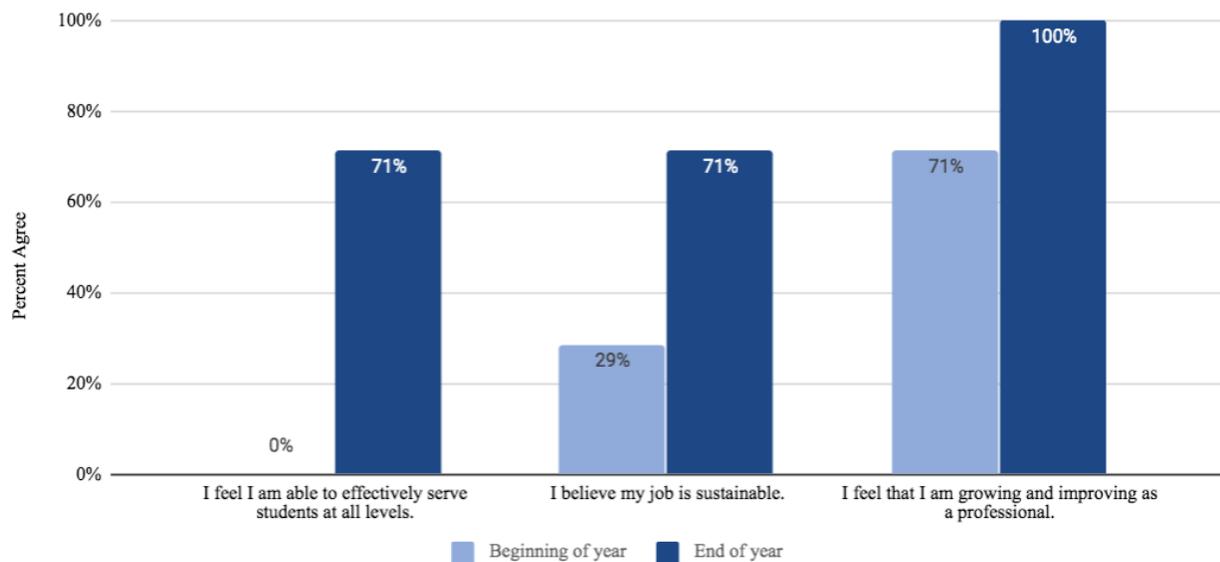
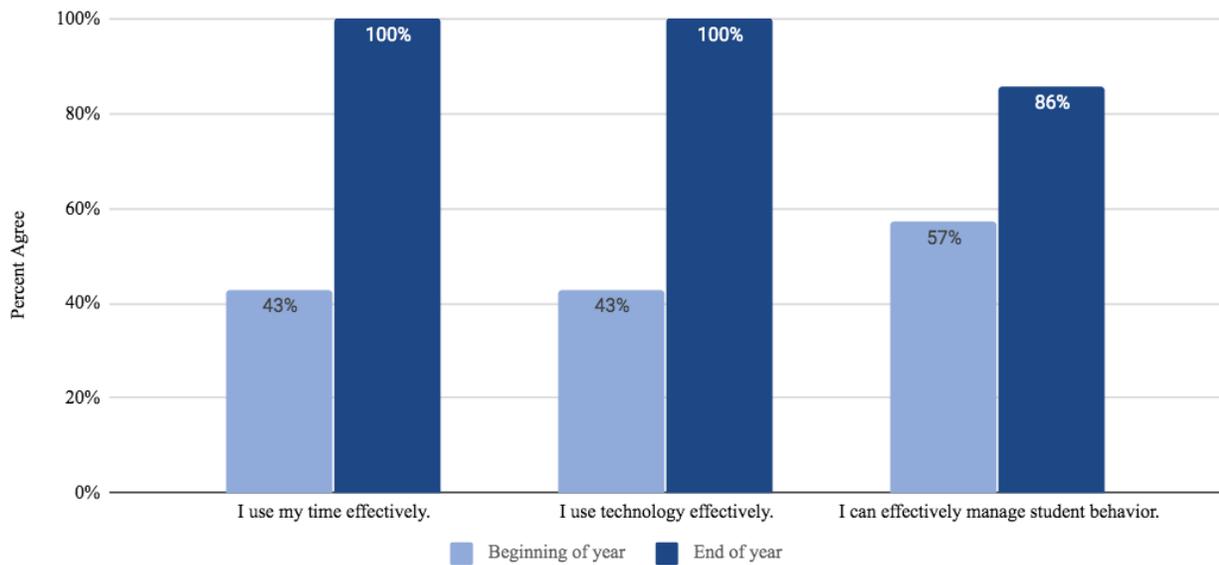
<sup>6</sup> According to longtime education researcher John Hattie, teacher efficacy and credibility are two of the factors that have the greatest impact on student achievement. "Hattie Ranking: 252 Influences And Effect Sizes." Visible Learning, <https://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>

### I. Student and Teacher Survey Data

For the 2018-19 school year, we trained 8 pilot Fellows across three different schools in Washington, DC and Northern Virginia, and partnered with the Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) at Johns Hopkins University to [analyze these teachers' impacts](#). Using surveys administered both prior to implementation of the Modern Classrooms approach and then again after one year of implementation, CRRE found that students reported a greater sense of self-efficacy and self-regulation in learning after one year of experiencing the Modern Classrooms approach. Students were also more likely to report feeling cared for and supported by their Modern Classrooms teachers. Below is a snapshot of our statistically significant results as reported by CRRE:



After implementing the Modern Classrooms model, our teachers also reported improvements in classroom management and their ability to serve students at all levels, as well as positive changes in job sustainability and professional satisfaction. Below is a snapshot of our effects on teachers as reported by CRRE:



Despite the small sample sizes involved, these results are highly promising. However, they are only the start of our research efforts. For the upcoming school year, we have contracted CRRE to run a [comprehensive program-impact study](#), which will examine the same survey data, as well as student-achievement results on state standardized tests -- in both Modern Classrooms and

comparison (traditional) classrooms at the same schools. We believe this study will give us an even better sense of our impacts.

## II. Feedback from Students and Teachers

When we survey our Fellows and their students, we also collect qualitative feedback about their experiences. Here's a sampling of what our middle school educators have said about their ability to give students feedback:

- “Last year I was not really able to give feedback because I was always leading the class whole group and there was no downtime. Students had to come to tutoring or they didn't get feedback at all because I taught nearly 200 kids so it was hard to do feedback. Now I am able to give in-the-moment feedback to each kid/group multiple times in a class period and that's pretty cool.” -Montenique Woodard, 6th grade science
- “Modern Classrooms allows me to give productive feedback in a way I have never been able to before. I have the time to pull students and look at their mistakes with them each and every day. I look through classwork, identify mistakes, and, as a result, create groups based on similar misconceptions, where I can provide targeted support that students desperately need. In addition, my feedback is more timely. The amount of meaningful one-on-one conversations and small group work I have been able to do far and away surpasses what I had been able to accomplish in a traditional model.” -Nora Barnett, 6th grade math
- “The blended learning format frees me up during class to give more procedural and academic feedback to students. On the procedural side, we have many conversations per day about strategies for getting work done, for solving our own problems, for learning more efficiently. On the academic side, I am able to comment on work in the moment rather than waiting for the weekend to grade a stack of papers. Students are getting used to receiving feedback right away and always knowing exactly where they stand in a given lesson or unit.” -Emily Culp, 6th grade English
- “Feedback has become more targeted and meaningful. It has become an integral part of the learning experience in the classroom and gives serious meaning to 'learning through mistakes' and a 'growth mindset'. Also, students are 'asking' for feedback now which rarely happened before. "Do I need to revise this?" and "Mr. Sholtas unsubmitted my assignment because I needed to fix it" are phrases that are pretty commonplace now with the Modern Classrooms approach.” -Stephen Sholtas, 6th grade science

Students have also responded positively to the Modern Classrooms model. Last year, in Mr. Sholtas's 6th-grade science class, for instance, one student reported that “every time I watch the lesson on the computer, I feel like I understand better. Because I can always go back and watch again.” Another wrote that “I love how we have the power to learn our own way, it's more based on the student and the teacher guides us along and keeps us in pace.” This is just a sampling of what our teachers and their students tell us!

### **III. Existing Research on Teaching and Learning**

Beyond the research we ourselves have conducted, existing literature on teaching and learning lends strong support to the practices we instill in our Fellows. For instance:

- We worked with a student at Princeton University to [analyze research](#) on educational models similar to Modern Classrooms. She concluded that “from this foundation of literature, I expect that the methods implemented by The Modern Classrooms Project to increase students’ level of engagement, [and] the teachers’ understanding of each student’s learning style and academic strengths.”
- The techniques we teach our Fellows for instructional-video creation were based on [extensive research into best practices in instructional videos](#).
- We commissioned a full design review from two professors of education at Johns Hopkins University, and revised all of our training materials to be in line with their feedback and suggestions.

We will continue to refine and improve our efforts as we grow.

### **How Will We Change the World?**

Our theory of action is simple: we spend one year training and supporting teachers, and these teachers spend the rest of their careers giving their students better learning experiences.

Can our model scale? We know that the interest exists: an [Edutopia video](#) featuring our work has over 1.3 million views (and counting) on social media, and we regularly receive requests for information and/or training from educators across the country and the world. Although our base is in the DC area, we’ve signed contracts to provide in-person training to schools in Pennsylvania, New York, and North Carolina, and have built an [online course](#) that has reached teachers from over 30 states and five continents. And we are training our best educators to become the next generation of Modern Classroom Trainers so that they can join us in leading this movement.

What could we do with \$1 billion? That’s easy: train 300,000 middle school teachers, so that they can give more high-quality feedback to 20,000,000 middle school students each year.

Transforming classrooms in order to facilitate high-quality feedback is hard work, but it can be done. In fact, we know how to do it -- and we know there are teachers out there who want to follow our lead. Now we just need the resources to empower them.