Parents' Guide to Surviving Mr. Bigler's Chemistry Classes

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About Mr. Bigler

As I'm fond of telling my students, school is not the real world; it's a simulator that adults have created in order to prepare children and adolescents for the real world. Almost everything I do in class is based on the experiences that I think my students need within the simulator, in order to be successful in the "real" world.

I have been teaching chemistry since 2003, and and have taught here in Waltham since the 2007–08 school year. I thoroughly enjoy teaching adolescents, and Waltham High School is a positive, supportive environment, and a great place to be a teacher or student.

Beliefs & Goals

I believe that all students can learn, and all students *want to* learn. In order to make this happen, my students need interesting, relevant work that is challenging, but within their capabilities. I also believe that any student who learns the material and makes a good effort to do all of the work should be able to earn a minimum grade of C (and usually an A or B).

As every student and parent is undoubtedly aware, because of the statewide testing required in every state under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, students are required to pass a set of MCAS tests in order to graduate, and schools are assessed based on the percentage of students who pass. In order to ensure that students pass these tests, teachers are focusing on specific types of questions, and teaching the step-by-step process for solving each one.

Unfortunately, this method of teaching focuses on low-level thinking skills, which means high-level thinking and problem-solving skills are getting less and less attention in class. Every year, college professors remark that this lack of high-level thinking skills is resulting in high school graduates who are less and less well prepared for college, despite the fact that MCAS scores keep going up.

My primary goal, as a high school chemistry teacher, is to do what I can to counteract this trend, and help my students develop their high-level thinking skills, to ensure that they not only get into a good college, but that they can continue to enjoy success in college.

For some of my students, this crash course in high-level thinking means that my chemistry class challenges them in ways that they're not used to. Some students who usually breeze through their classes easily, can find themselves struggling, especially on the first few tests. However, with perseverence and a little extra help, almost all of them develop the skills they need and do well in the class.

Many of those same students who struggled early on in my classes have contacted me as college freshmen and sophomores to tell me that my class was one of the most influential in preparing them from what college would really be like, and that as a result, they found themselves better prepared than many of their peers in college.

In short, if your son/daughter is struggling early in the year, this is a common experience, and usually a temporary one.

Success Strategies

Because I challenge my students more than they're used to, I am a firm believer in giving students second chances, and maximizing their opportunities to succeed. Some of my success strategies include:

- **Re-tests**. For major tests, students may take one or more re-tests, if they have not yet mastered the material. The requirements for taking a re-test are that all homework relating to the topic must be turned in, and that they take the re-test within two weeks of the original test date (as well as by the end of the quarter). The maximum grade on a re-test is 90% (A−).
- **Rewrites**. Formal lab reports may be rewritten. As with re-tests, rewrites must be turned in by the end of the same quarter as the original lab report, and the maximum grade on a rewrite is 90% (A−).
- **Addenda**. Students may submit addenda to lab notebook write-ups to add items they forgot to include originally. The maximum grade including addenda is 90% (A−).
- **Late credit**. Late homework is worth 70% credit if turned in before the test on the topic, and 50% afterwards. I do this because I believe that if an assignment is worthwhile, students will always learn more by doing it (even if it's late) than they will by getting a zero.

Beyond all of the above, I encourage students and parents to talk with me about anything that they think will help them succeed. I do my best to accommodate every reasonable request.

Grades

Grades are weighted according to a point system. Point values are:

Tests:	100 points each
Formal lab reports:	100 points each
Lab notebook write-ups:	25 points each
Quizzes:	25 points each
Homework:	5 points each

The student's grade is the points earned as a percentage of the total possible points for the quarter. (A typical quarter might have 500 possible points.) I don't drop any grades, because students can re-take any test or re-submit any work that they did poorly on.

Extra credit is in the form of "mole points," which look like money. Students turn in their mole points, and at the end of the quarter each mole point is worth one point added to their lowest test grade.

Because of my generous re-test policy, I generally don't give extra credit assignments. This encourages students to bring up their grades by focusing their efforts on mastering the topics covered in class.

Students may elect to have their grades posted anonymously in the classroom (under a code name that they choose), so students can track their progress throughout the year. Students (and parents) can also check their grades via the internet, through `http://www.edline.net` Please let me know if you need an activation code, or if you need any help signing up for an account and logging in.

Make-Up Work & Postponements

If students are absent, they can retrieve their assignments (including downloading worksheets) from my Moodle site. Go to `http://www.mrbigler.com` and click on the class, and then on "Moodle site." The moodle site allows guest access, so parents can use it to check the assignment calendar and specific assignments if you want.

According to WHS policy, students are normally expected to make up work within a week. My students are welcome to negotiate a different make-up schedule with me if they need it—I'll usually grant any reasonable request.

I also allow my students to postpone a test or major assignment for a day if they have a good reason and they ask at least two school days in advance. (Tests in at least two other subjects on the same day is an example of a good reason.) I usually require my students to provide some sort of documentation, and I may contact you to double-check if I have questions.

Extra Help

I am available for extra help after school almost every day until at least 3:00 P.M., unless I have a meeting after school. Students get a "mole point" of extra credit if they come in for extra help after school (provided that we spend at least 15 minutes working on chemistry).

It's important for students with circumstances that might affect their performance in class to discuss their situations with me. I try to the best of my ability to accommodate everyone's needs, but I can only accommodate situations that I know about.

Contacting Me

Please feel invited to contact me any time you need information or would like a telephone call or face-to-face meeting. (You don't have to wait until there's a problem—I enjoy talking with parents when things are going well too!)

The best way to communicate with me is by email, either to `JeffreyBigler@k12.waltham.ma.us` or `mrbigler@mrbigler.com`. You are also welcome to leave a message on my voice mail extension, which is (781) 313–3093 x7452. However, please be advised that because I almost never get voice mail (usually only one or two messages a year), I sometimes forget to check it for several days at a time.