Academic Problems: Determining the Root Cause

Struggling students can appear quite similar on the surface. They might be reluctant to engage in academic tasks, seem to work more slowly than peers, and lack the range of academic skills expected for their grade-level. In fact, though, there are differing explanations for why a student might encounter roadblocks to learning. This table lists the most frequent 'root ccauses' of classroom learning problems. When teachers select a specific cause as the most likely explanation for a student's academic difficulties, that hypothesis acts as a compass needle, pointing toward interventions that most logically address the student academic problems.

Hypothesis	Recommendation
• *Skill Deficit.* The student has not yet acquired the skill(s).	Provide direct, explicit instruction to acquire the skill. Reinforce the student for effort and accuracy.
• *Fluency Deficit.* The student has acquired the skill(s) but is not yet proficient.	Provide opportunities for the student to practice the skill and give timely performance feedback. Reinforce the student for fluency as well as accuracy.
• *Retention Deficit.* The student can acquire the skill(s) but has difficulty retaining it over an extended period.	Give the student frequent opportunities for practice to entrench a skill and help the student to retain it over time. Begin by scheduling more numerous practice episodes within a short time ('massed review') to promote initial fluency and then strengthen longer-term skill retention by scheduling additional periodic review ('distributed review') across longer spans of several weeks or more.
• *Endurance Deficit.* The student can perform the academic task(s), but only for brief periods.	• Provide scaffolding supports to help the student to perform the academic task. • In structuring lessons or independent work, gradually lengthen the period of time that the student spends in skills practice or use. • Have the student self-monitor active engagement in skill-building activities--setting daily, increasingly ambitious work goals and then tracking whether he or she successfully reaches those goals.
• *Generalization Deficit.* The student possesses the skill(s) but fails to use across appropriate situations or settings.	• Enlist adults to prompt and remind the student to use the target skills when needed. • Train the student to identify relevant characteristics of situations or settings when the skill should be used—and to self-monitor skill use. • Provide incentives (e.g., praise, rewards) for the student to use the skill in the appropriate settings.
• *Learned Helplessness.* The student lacks confidence in his or her academic abilities and—as a result—withholds efforts.	• Adjust the work to the student's ability level. • Use scaffolding and accommodation strategies to make the academic work more manageable, e.g., breaking larger tasks into smaller increments ("chunking"), allowing the student to take brief breaks during work sessions, etc. • Use positive communication techniques to build student motivation and optimism, including praise, growth-mindset statements, and wise feedback.