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Back to the Basics of Classroom Management

BY RYAN DEL GUERCIO
From NJEA Review

On my first day of teaching, a veteran colleague told me, “It only takes one student to ruin your day.” I soon discovered that statement to be extremely true.

I was a rookie with no student teaching experience who started working at a high school two months into the year. Because my classes had been taught by numerous substitute teachers, the students didn’t believe that I was their “real” teacher. Adding to my challenge, the students were almost entirely male in a technology education course where dangerous tools were being used. I had to learn classroom management fast!

I was determined not to be one of the many teachers who leave the profession after just a few years. Instead, I developed many useful strategies and through the years, I have never stopped experimenting with new discipline methods. And no matter how long I teach, I always go back to the basics when it comes to how to handle my classroom:

- Establish control,
- Create effective discipline policies,
- Build rapport, and
- Determine the needs of problem students.

Establish Control

The more discipline problems a teacher faces, the less effective the instruction becomes. Creat-

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ing an environment optimized for learning is accomplished by establishing control. There is no better time to set the tone for the class than during the first few weeks of school.

This is the time to address poor behavior and send the message that it will not be tolerated. Assert your authority in the proper way. The worst possible thing to do is to ignore misbehavior because you want to seem cool or because you think it will go away. That is rarely the case, and once control is lost, it is very difficult to get it back.

Establishing control at the beginning of the year will make your job easier, but it doesn’t mean your work is done. Classroom management is ongoing process; it can be difficult to sustain because it requires attention to detail on a daily basis. Just because students abide by the rules in the fall doesn’t mean they won’t test the boundaries later in the year.

Strategies to establish control include:

► Create a seating chart for students on day one, and if needed, change seats throughout the year.

► Be as organized as possible as you present a lesson. A seamless lesson provides students with little downtime, and therefore, fewer chances to misbehave.

► Greet students as they enter the room and give them direction right away (“sit in your seats,” “take out your homework,” “find your folder,” etc.).

► Identify class leaders and gain their respect. The behavior of kids that the other students admire sets the tone for the class. These students may even help you by telling classmates to “quiet down” or by modeling good behavior.

► Never argue with a student when addressing misbehavior. Arguing sends the message that students are your equal and that is not the case.

► Use the “broken record” technique:
  • Give the student a direction, such as “Please have a seat.”
  • Be sure to use “please” and “thank you.” Impolite behavior on your part gives the student license to behave badly.
  • Don’t argue with the students if they disobey.
  • Repeat the direction two times, and then give the student a choice, such as “Sit in your seat please or you will receive detention for failure to follow the teacher’s directions.”
  • Let the student take responsibility for his or her actions by choosing to take a detention. Most of the time students will want to avoid the consequence.

► Use positive/praise directions by recognizing students who are following directions, such as “I see Stephen has his book out and so does Marc—good job.”
Create Effective Discipline Policies

An effective policy asserts your authority and ensures that all students will be treated equally. Each student must know the teacher's expectations.

On the first day of school, I issue my classroom rules and policies. I identify specific misbehaviors that will not be tolerated and am very clear about the consequences if rules are broken (first offense—detention; second offense—call parent or guardian; third offense—submit an incident report to the administration). They understand that more serious incidents such as fighting or bullying will be immediately handled by the administration.

Effective discipline policy strategies include:

- Make rules clear and concise.
- Consequences must fit the offense (the penalty should not be too severe or too light).
- Be committed to following your policies—don’t make empty threats:
  - If you assign detention, write down the student’s name, date, and offense. Immediately, he or she will realize you are serious and fully expect him or her to attend your detention.
  - If you tell a student you will email or call a parent, make sure you do.
- Try to gain the parents as allies by following these steps:
  - Introduce yourself clearly.
  - Describe the behavior problem and your response.
  - Explain what you want to happen (and why) and how the parent can help.
  - Make it clear that you are acting in their child’s best interest. You may want to mention something that the child does well.
  - Give the parent an opportunity to ask questions. Try to gain a commitment that the parent will assist in modifying the child’s behavior.

- If you keep a student for detention, briefly discuss the infraction. Don’t assume the child knows why what he or she did was wrong.
- Help students to see the connection between behaving properly and chances for academic success.
- Have younger students complete a “detention log” activity sheet that includes the following questions:
  - How did I misbehave?
  - How could I have handled the situation differently?
  - What can my teacher do to help me behave better in the future?
  - In the future I will ________ to avoid any further detentions.

- Utilize the resources within the school (school psychologists, guidance counselors, coaches, etc.) to help with disciplining at-risk students.
Build Rapport

It would be wonderful if students did what they are supposed to do because teachers are authority figures. But today’s reality is that students must respect you (they would say “like you”) before they obey you. That’s why building rapport may be the most important principle of classroom management.

Effective classroom management will never be achieved by forcing or coercing a student to learn or behave properly. If a student believes that you have his or her best interests at heart, he/she will want to behave properly and do well in the class. If they believe you are doing your best to make the class relevant and interesting, they are more likely to do what you ask.

Get to know your students. Future conflicts can be avoided if you know a little bit about your students and observe how they interact with others.

A huge step in building rapport with my students is getting involved in school events. When I first started teaching, I attended a freshman football game and it paid off immensely. I could tell my students were excited that I came to see them play and I felt that it changed our relationship in the classroom. Taking an interest in what they like to do may just cause them to view you—and your class—differently.

Strategies to Build Rapport

► Show students that you are a real person:
  ◆ Place pictures of your pets or kids on your desk.
  ◆ Post banners from your favorite sports teams around the classroom.
  ◆ Talk about your hobbies.
  ◆ Use humor.
  ◆ Observe your students to learn more about them.
  ◆ See which students are friendly with each other.
  ◆ Give compliments about their clothes or a new haircut.
  ◆ Find out what sports students play or clubs they belong to.
  ◆ Attend or chaperone school events (athletics, dances, concerts, etc.).

Note: Be careful not to overstep the boundaries of a student-teacher relationship. Sometimes students view teachers as their peers and say inappropriate things. Simply respond by saying, “I might be friendly, but I am not your friend, I am your teacher.”

Determine the Needs of Problem Students

It’s important to determine the underlying needs of problem students who continually exhibit poor behaviors.

I once had a student who repeatedly used profanity toward his classmates and even me. He was
always negative and angry. This was surprising because he was a good student in the beginning of the school year and his behavior seemed to change overnight. I disciplined the student based on my classroom rules, but his behavior did not change.

Finally, I called the parent again and found out that the student’s parents were recently separated and the child was not accepting it very well. I then referred the student to counselors at school and the poor behavior stopped as quickly as it had started. Most teenagers haven't learned the skills to cope with stress and therefore exhibit inappropriate behavior when something is really bothering them.

If you do learn something serious about a student, remember that you are not a counselor. Contact parents, school psychologists, guidance counselor, and/or coaches to assist the child and correct his behavior.

Classroom management is an essential element in student learning and sustaining academic achievement. The four principles described above must all be implemented to achieve optimum results. But don’t be discouraged when students do misbehave, even if you have incorporated all of these strategies. Human beings of all ages misbehave—it’s how we react to it that counts.

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