

## Q & A: Classroom Management

**W**hat is your biggest classroom management concern? Students at Saint Mary College in Kansas gave us their questions, and John Zola, a veteran teacher, responded.

*In an inclusive classroom, how does a teacher who is not trained in handling special-needs children balance the special needs of one child with the needs of the entire class?*

Your best bet is to immediately read the student's IEP (Individual Education Program) and talk to the special education teacher in your building who is the child's case manager. Ask for information about the student's particular strengths and challenges and for suggestions about what has worked in the past. Enlist the special education teacher's assistance in planning for and adapting your curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as for ideas about how to involve other students in supporting the learning of the special-needs student. As in all classroom management situations, spend time talking with the student to create a human connection. We live in an inclusive society, and inclusion provides important experiences for both the special-needs student and the class as a whole.

*How do you address different student skill levels?*

No matter how allegedly homogeneously grouped, every classroom will have a variety of skill levels because of the unique characteristics each student brings to the learning process. Early assessment of skill levels through writing and other samples gives you a "lay of the land" from which to begin working. Pacing, group strategies such as jigsaw learning, and choice are ways of bringing all students to common learning outcomes. Dealing with diversity in skill levels is one of the daily realities of the classroom, just as is dealing with diversity of learning styles and "ways of being."

*How can I get my students to want to behave and control themselves?*

Think about when you are engaged in your daily work routines. And think about when

you tend to drift off into inattention and acting silly. Worthwhile work, engaging learning situations, respectful treatment, and freedom to make choices—these all help to engage us actively in the work we do each day. The same is true for students. We assume that students want to misbehave and act out of control. Nothing could be further from the truth. Students want school to be interesting and meaningful, not necessarily easy. They want to be treated as the competent individuals they are and hope to become—not ordered to engage in purposeless tasks that can be demeaning to the concept of learning. The more you treat your students as partners in the adventure of learning, the more they will want to behave and control themselves.

*In light of recent violence in schools, what is the best way to deal with a student who shows a tendency toward problem behavior?*

From the first day, establish a climate where violence, outbursts, put-downs, and lack of respect for people and property are not acceptable. This means teaching, modeling, and reinforcing basic behavior expectations. The climate you create in your classroom is the most powerful tool you have in dealing with problem behaviors. If students are listened to, know that their ideas are respected by peers and adults, are dealt with in a respectful and direct manner, and most important, find the work of the classroom interesting and engaging, problem behaviors will be few and far between. If the student has special needs, there should be a specific plan in place to deal with problem behaviors. Work with the special education staff to create situations that will be most successful for the particular student. As always, prevention is the best initial strategy.

*What is the best form of discipline to use with a disrespectful student?*

When a student is disrespectful, the first, and hardest, thing to do is to avoid getting into an immediate power struggle. Keep in mind that "behavior is communication." What is the behavior saying about what is going on with the student? When the student's behavior is

clearly inappropriate, he needs to be called on it; however, there is never a reason to demean a student in front of his peers. If appropriate, put the class on "auto-pilot" and spend a moment talking one-on-one with the student. If you can't take a moment, clearly state that the behavior is unacceptable and that you and he will deal with it right away. Again, avoid a confrontation that results in both you and the student needing to save face in front of the class. Defuse the situation, deal with it, and work with the student and appropriate resource personnel to ensure that the behavior won't be repeated.

*When is it best to ignore a child's misbehavior? At what point do you step in?*

This is a tough call! Sometimes, a student will misbehave to draw attention to herself and away from uncomfortable learning situations. Sometimes all a student expects is negative attention and this is better than no attention at all. Sometimes a student's misbehavior is a direct challenge to the teacher's authority. Although knowing the exact motivation for a given behavior is nearly impossible, it is worth remembering that behavior is communication. Ask yourself what the student is trying to tell you or the class through her choice of behavior. Often, the easiest response is to give a gentle reminder or to walk over and stand next to the student without interrupting the flow of the lesson. Other times, more direct action is called for. The best suggestion is to get to know your students as well as possible, as quickly as possible, so that you can tailor your response to the individual and not the overt behavior. Although it would be great to have a simple answer to this question, there is no magic secret for when to ignore and when to confront student behaviors.

*How can a teacher best handle a bully who may also try to threaten and bully the teacher? What if a student becomes physically threatening to the teacher?*

Your first response to these situations should be to report the concern to the administration. Teachers should expect to get support and to work in a safe environment. Beyond this, ask yourself why a student would

threaten a teacher. Is this a patterned response to a feeling of disrespect? Is it a response to being put down or put in an otherwise compromised position in front of peers? Is it a fear of embarrassment? Hostile behavior on the part of the students should never be excused or tolerated, but such behavior is far less likely to occur when there is a climate of respect and purposeful learning in the classroom.

***What can a teacher do with a student who simply does not want to learn?***

The first thing the teacher can do is ask, Why does this student not want to learn here and now? Students are always learning—how to manipulate situations and people, how to work peer relations, how to skateboard, or how to shoot free throws. The question is why the student doesn't want to learn in the classroom. Next, be honest in your assessment of the student. Does he not want to learn or is the problem that he won't do what he is told to do? Learning and obedience are not the same thing! If in fact the student doesn't want to learn, it is time to begin analyzing reasons for the "block." Is there a skill deficiency that makes learning so difficult that it is easier to take the heat for not learning? If so, work backward to address the skills that are lacking. Is there a history of discomfort or bad experiences that is blocking the student from learning? If so, work to determine this block and accept that the student has to be led carefully back into a safe and secure relationship with learning. Would something as simple as a choice in topic motivate the student? Believe that very few students "simply don't want to learn."

***How should you deal with students who continually come to class tardy?***

Set a clear expectation of what it means to be on time; establish a clear consequence for tardiness; and enforce the rules and consequences firmly, consistently, and with good humor. Consequences should be appropriate to the "crime" and not cause a hardship on the teacher. Thus, a policy of "X" minutes of after-class or recess time for "Y" minutes of tardiness leaves the teacher with a book-keeping nightmare. Rather, a policy of "10

minutes of after-class or recess time if you are tardy, period" is much simpler to enforce. The key, however, is consistency and even-handedness. Tardiness is an annoyance, not a capital offense. There is no need to make a big deal when the student enters late and no need for a lecture or sermon. A simple "you owe me 10 minutes" becomes quite clear as the policy is enforced. Tardiness that is truly chronic or excessive is a matter for you to work out with the school administration, counselors, and parents.

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***What would you do if the class got out of control?***

Turn in my teaching license! If this question implies truly "out of control" rather than the periodic chaos that might result from a failed lesson plan, then the cause of the problem is to be found weeks or months in the past. A truly out-of-control classroom has never had norms established and reinforced. Such a classroom is unfit for learning, and students are not only being cheated out of the specific learning environment, they are learning that classrooms can be antithetical to learning anything at all. A teacher who has created such an environment—and these environ-

ments are created just as much as well-managed environments are—needs immediate remediation and professional support. In such a classroom, the teacher never described or modeled expectations and did not follow through effectively when students violated expectations. Episodic losses of control can be dealt with using the established norms and expectations for the classroom. Once the group is back on task, it is important to reflect on the causes of the chaos. Was it a failed lesson plan? Incomplete or confusing directions? Sour peer relations? A tired teacher? Each of these can be addressed and fixed.

***How do you make the curriculum interesting and useful while still making learning fun?***

The answer is found in a lifetime of teaching, learning, professional growth, collegiality, conference attendance, professional organization work, reading, and listening to and watching students. These are the central tasks of teaching. It would seem pointless and counterproductive to work with uninteresting and meaningless curriculum and to make learning burdensome.

***A final word . . .***

Classroom management does not lend itself to quick fixes. Well-run classrooms result from careful planning and consistent interactions between teacher and students. The responses above are based on mutually respectful relationships, honest communication, and a sense of open-mindedness on the part of the teacher. These values provide a context for dealing with a wide variety of classroom management situations. \*

*John Zola has taught social studies in grades 7–12 for more than 20 years. He teaches at New Vista High School in the Boulder (Colo.) Valley School District. He also teaches methods classes at the University of Colorado and conducts workshops on a variety of topics. Sister Mary Pat Lenahan, assistant professor of education and faculty advisor of Saint Mary College ASCD (Kan.), compiled these questions from her students.*