

Order ORDER IN THE CLASSROOM

Students are not coming to school ready to learn or knowing how to behave. A consistent classroom management system can save instructional time and improve the school climate.

We have witnessed an array of classroom management skills over the course of a combined 24 years as administrators. In numerous discussions we have had with new teachers, the leading cause of frustration is student discipline/classroom management. Almost half of all new teachers leave the profession within five years, while it takes about three to seven years for teachers to develop skills that enable them to consistently improve student achievement (Haycock, 2006).

After reviewing five university teacher preparation programs, we have concluded that classroom discipline is briefly addressed, with very little direct instruction about specific skills for managing student behavior. In addition, the social/emotional component of learning, which is the basis for effective classroom management, is not covered adequately. Even teachers with outstanding technical skills may not be able to impart their expertise if there is no order in the classroom.

We cannot assume, even at the high school level, students are equipped with all of the necessary tools to function adequately in a classroom. Students are not coming to school ready to learn or knowing how to behave.

At the middle and high school levels students typically have more than five different teachers, each with their own set of expectations.

To think that students can be told once, at the beginning of the school year, how to assimilate in a classroom is like telling them only once how to perform the operation of long division and then expecting them to remember it all year long without re-teaching. How about the learners who function more in the visual or kinesthetic realm and process information differently than auditory learners?

Teachers will not be effective as instructional leaders unless they connect with students on a human level, accept students with “unconditional positive regard,” set appropriate limits and communicate high expectations. Relationships are a keystone to well-run classrooms. The wise words of Madeline Hunter ring true: “Kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

More than 33 years of research underscores the importance of effective classroom management techniques. Teaching rules and procedures are high on the list of most important skills found throughout all research on classroom management.

Kathleen Cotton (1990) summarizes it this way: “Effective managers teach behavioral rules and classroom routines in much the same way as they teach instructional content, and they review these

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frequently at the beginning of the school year and periodically thereafter. Whether it's kindergarten or 10th grade students, we cannot ever assume in school settings today that children arrive ready and willing to behave.”

One of the major flaws in some classroom management systems is that the teacher gives numerous chances, requests or warnings – all of which waste academic instructional time. The multiple exchanges with the same students reinforce the same behavior in other students. In essence, there are multiple opportunities to misbehave when students are not taught to self-correct at the first directive. If all students are systematically taught through a direct instruction model how to follow classroom rules and routines, multiple warnings and repeated requests can be eliminated, thus saving valuable instructional minutes.

The adolescent brain and decision-making

Brain research finds that decisions are often generated from primarily the emotional center of the brain rather than the frontal cortex, at the adolescent stage of development. Adolescents are supposed to test limits as an age-appropriate response to their environment. Conflict is an essential part of growing up. Teachers have been taught to be tolerant.

If tolerance carries over to the social/behavioral aspect of the classroom, situations can reach an unbearable limit. When this occurs, either a threat is made that cannot be enforced, the behavior is ignored and the structure of the classroom erodes, or a statement is made that hurts the feelings of the student. A frustrated teacher can give away his or her authority by sending a student to the office for low-level issues that have escalated to the next level.

The research of Adelman and Taylor (2008) clearly demonstrates the necessity of social/emotional learning and how it contributes to academic performance. Whenever conflict or disruption in the classroom gets in the way of a student's learning or the learning of others, it has to be addressed immediately and consistently.

Addressing only academic goals for students is never enough. When social and behavior skills are taught in conjunction with academic skills, there is more time for instruction as the year progresses. Just as students have a chance to self-correct with academic challenges, they must also be given the chance to self-correct by receiving instruction for appropriate ways to behave in the school setting.

Pioneer High School has the highest at-risk 11th and 12th grade students in the district – those in jeopardy of not obtaining a diploma. There is a sense of urgency to address the needs of this population as efficiently as possible. Less than ideal parenting is not an acceptable excuse for the lack of student learning.

How many times have we, as administrators, addressed a situation where a staff member has sent a student to the office for a situation, such as failing to bring a pencil to class, that escalated to defiance? Thanks to an investment in a “Time to Teach” training from the Center for Teacher Effectiveness, there are no discipline referrals or queens on our campuses. Staff members know they must address low-level classroom disruptions and prevent them from

becoming “no-win” situations. As a result, we have experienced a significant decrease in discipline referrals, including out-of-school suspensions and in-house suspensions.

At our continuation high school we have also experienced an increase in passing rates on the California High School Exit Exam and other student achievement measures. Furthermore, the school has experienced an overall positive systemic cultural change.

Social-emotional learning is effective for all students, regardless of socioeconomic or grade levels. At Olympus Junior High, a school located in a more affluent area, the “Time to Teach” skills were initially introduced to just one teacher. Because of the resulting positive changes with the most challenging students on campus, other teachers took notice. Eventually, the entire school adopted these skill sets for students and found more time for instruction because student behavior was conducive to academic learning. The students have learned, through a direct instruction model, appropriate behaviors in a school setting.

What makes the training effective is the extensive research used to design effective and engaging lessons by minimizing problem behavior. The brain's learning mechanism utilizes similar pathways, whether it is learning appropriate social-emotional behavior or academic skills. Teachers who seek to provoke positive emotional responses in their students and deliver meaningful and significant lessons promote maximum learning and retention. In turn, students are less likely to lose focus, become inattentive and misbehave.

Modeling civil and respectful behavior

As adults who remain in a thinking state vs. an emotional state while dealing with student discipline issues, we model civil and respectful behavior. The result is more buy-in from the student for school rules and routines. Overall school climate is improved because students do not feel mistreated and unheard.

Whatever discipline approach or classroom management system is followed, it is critical to consistently and diligently honor and uplift the dignity of every single student and adult in order to get to the business of optimal learning. ■

Reference and resources

- Adelman, Howard & Taylor, Linda. (2008). School Mental Health Project/Center for Mental Health in Schools. UCLA Department of Psychology.
- Cotton, Kathleen. (1990). *Summary of Research*. Hayden Lake, ID: Time to Teach Resource Manual.
- Haycock, Kati. (2006). *Fact Sheet: Finding and Keeping the Teachers We Need*. Alliance for Excellent Education.

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