



A Classroom Management Primer
for
Middle and Secondary School
Teachers

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Introduction

This document is part of a series of papers focusing on various aspects of effective teaching. (All documents in this series are available from the [IDOE Learning Connection](#).) The goal of this series is to address specific teaching-learning challenges to help new and less experienced teachers and teachers with limited preparation in instructional methodology become more effective in their classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to help teachers manage their classrooms to maximize the potential for learning. This material may contain useful reminders for more experienced teachers as well.

A basic component of being an effective teacher is having depth and breadth of knowledge in one's content area(s). However, that alone is not adequate preparation for teaching. Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong (*The First Days of School*, page 9, Harry K. Wong Publications, Inc., 1998) state that teachers must be proficient in three characteristics; namely, (1) have positive expectations for student success; (2) be extremely good classroom managers; and (3) know how to design lessons for student mastery.

Good classroom management may well be the most fundamental factor in student learning. A classroom that can be characterized by disruptive behavior, disrespectful actions, and/or other evidence of an out-of-control learning environment will undermine the effectiveness of the teacher. All classroom management actions and procedures used by teachers must be executed within a school's parameters for appropriate action. Therefore, it is important that teachers be thoroughly familiar with their schools' policies, rules, and procedures.

An Overview of the Need for Classroom Management Strategies

It is not the purpose of this overview to discuss theories of classroom management; rather, authoritative research was consulted to determine “what works.” A precursor to effective instruction is a learning environment that is under control. It is obvious from empirical evidence and research studies that student learning depends on engaging instruction AND a well-managed classroom.

Much of the information for this paper is based on: [*Training our future teachers: Classroom Management*](#), Revised January 2014, a National Council on Teacher Quality publication, referred to as NCTQ in this paper. This NCTQ report found that a large volume of research on classroom management exists. Much of the research was consolidated by the NCTQ into three authoritative summaries of 150 studies conducted over the last 60 years. Other relevant sources of information reported in a variety of publications, noted in this document, were drawn upon also. The experiences of the authors were a basis for input as well.

The January 2014 NCTQ report concluded that most teacher preparation programs in higher education that claimed to cover instruction in classroom management had major shortcomings between the claim and the content of the programs. A 2013 survey, [*Perspectives of Irreplaceable Teachers: What America’s Best Teachers Think About Teaching*](#), found that classroom management was “the top problem” reported. There seems to be no consensus regarding the specific aspects of classroom management that should be taught. Some educators believe that classroom management can be learned only through experience. Employing this method would require many years of trial and error—perhaps an entire teaching career—before classroom management competency could be developed.

Empirical evidence indicates that classroom management problems can be a cause of teachers leaving the profession. In some cases teachers may become resigned to accepting a level of student academic achievement well below appropriate expectations.

Picture a classroom where one or more of the following is a common occurrence:

- Students wander around the room sharpening pencils, talking to others, locating materials, etc.
- Teachers repeatedly ask for “attention” with increased voice volume and tone sharpness and/or frequently threaten disciplinary actions of various kinds.
- Students talk back to teachers.
- Students are disrespectful (including bullying) to other students.
- Students refuse to do in-class activities and/or to complete homework.
- Students violate basic classroom behavior requirements regarding gum chewing, use of cell phones, use of computers, etc.
- Students use disruptive ways to get the teacher’s attention to answer their questions as they work on projects, etc.
- Students employ various ways to cheat.
- Students have chronic tardiness and/or absences from class.
- Students ask for instructions to be repeated many times.
- Students fail to follow instructions for various kinds of classroom routines; e.g., handing in papers, etc.
- Other types of behavior problems may center on students arguing with the teacher about answers to test items, grades, or other matters.
- . . . and the list could go on!

The occurrences listed above do not create an appealing classroom picture. In fact, they could well make someone think twice about beginning or staying in a career in teaching! Fortunately, there are some effective approaches, based on research, that take the development of classroom management expertise out of the realm of trial and error.

Classroom Management Strategies

The NCTQ research study identified five strategies that are most likely to be effective in classroom management (NCTQ, [*Training our future teachers: Classroom Management*](#), Revised January 2014, pages 3-4). These five strategies, referred to as “The Big Five,” are presented on pages 4 through 8 of this document. Related ideas on implementation taken from other articles

on classroom management and from the experiences of the authors of this document are included in the following discussion of these five strategies:

1. **RULES.** Teachers (preferably teachers and students collaboratively) should develop **a limited set of positively stated expectations for behavior** at the beginning of the school year; avoid negative statements. These expectations should be **easy to understand, posted** in the classroom, **taught** by discussion and practice, **reviewed** periodically, and **applied** transparently and equitably. Students should understand the rationale for the rules and internalize these rules. In addition, students should understand the relationship between the rules and the teacher's learning objectives and goals. Rules may be modified as needed for certain activities.

Common specific rules include: Be in your seat when the bell rings; keep your hands to yourself; respect others' space and property; bring all of your materials to class; raise your hand to talk; immediately begin to work on the assignment/problem designated.

Rules can be phrased in general terms such as: Be respectful, be responsible, display good manners, practice acts of kindness, always do your best. The discussion of these rules should include situations that require students to explain what the rule means, how to apply it, and interpret whether or not a rule has been broken.

Consequences for breaking rules should be designed to progress gradually from less severe to more severe. [One of the authors of this document has found a four-question approach works for some students as the first step in the "consequence progression." The following questions (neatly arranged on a laminated card) are placed quietly on the desk of the "misbehaving student": (1) **What** are you doing? (2) **Why** are you doing it? (3) **What** are you supposed to be doing? (4) **What** are you going to do about it?] Subsequent steps include: a warning; a short detention; contacting parents/guardians; and if other measures have failed, requesting action from the school administration. Consequences should be logical in terms of the type of behavioral problem the student demonstrates. Consequences should not undermine the student's self-respect or dignity.

2. **ROUTINES.** Routines refer to behaviors and activities that contribute to smooth classroom operations. Teachers should put their routines and procedures in writing and teach them. They should include specific guidelines for how to act in a variety of situations (e.g., arriving in the classroom, handing in homework and other assignments, working in groups, leaving the classroom to go to the restroom, getting supplies and books, obtaining help, etc.). These routines should be taught at the beginning of each term and reviewed periodically throughout the term. Routines are enforced through reminders rather than consequences. For example, if a student does not bring a pencil to class, have loaners available for him/her to use during that class period rather than punishing the student. Teachers should demonstrate effective management of time and materials in the way they conduct their classes. In addition, they should make clear their expectations of students in this regard, especially in

transition between activities. School routines for fire, tornado, evacuation, codes, and other types of school/classroom drills should be posted, reviewed frequently, and rehearsed with students.

3. **PRAISE (Includes Acknowledgment and Rewards).** Teachers should reinforce positive behavior using acknowledgment, praise, and appropriate rewards. Intangible rewards such as acknowledgment and praise should be specific and focus on the process and/or the work done, not on the student per se or on his or her character (e.g., say, “Your explanation is very clear” rather than, “You are a good student.” Rewards may be tangible (e.g., a prize such as school supplies or a privilege such as extra computer time). Rewards can be used for individual or group behavior and may be phased out over time as students’ behavior improves by habit. The NCTQ identified the following Do’s and Don’ts (augmented with information from a variety of other professional information sources) for successful use of acknowledgment, praise, and positive reinforcement:

Do . . .

- Be specific about the behavior being acknowledged or praised. Rather than just saying, “good job,” include the behavior performance involved. For example, say, “you used five excellent resource documents for your report; good job.”
- Make praise contingent on the student actually doing the target behavior or making significant progress toward the goal; use course objectives/standards where appropriate. Badges may be used to indicate progress toward the target behavior.
- Be sincere in the way praise is given to a student.
- Give praise immediately following the appropriate behavior.
- Consider the individual student’s characteristics, such as age, and give praise appropriately.
- Praise demonstration of appropriate process/strategies without including judgment of the target outcome.
- Give praise and/or badges frequently as a student acquires a behavior and taper off with the student’s mastery of that behavior.

Don’t . . .

- Praise the person or trait (e.g., “Jill is so intelligent”).
- Use reinforcers for a task that students already want to do without setting a performance target.
- Ignore the student’s individual response to praise (do not embarrass the student).
- Praise trivial accomplishments or weak efforts.
- Inflate praise.
- Encourage students to attribute success or failure to things over which they have no control—luck, intelligence, or lack of intelligence.

- Rely on praise/rewards to the extent they become expected and prevent the development of intrinsic motivation.

Some things to keep in mind:

- Properly implemented, praise will focus on process and strategies. The student's attention should be drawn to what leads to success and to greater effort in overcoming obstacles and setbacks. The right focus helps prevent students from attributing success or failure to "luck," lack of intelligence, or other conditions over which they have no control.
 - Students react to praise in different ways. Deliver praise in private or via written feedback on an assignment when that fits the student's preferences (some studies indicate older students tend to prefer private praise).
 - The ultimate purpose of using praise/acknowledgment/rewards is to help students develop intrinsic motivation to do their best.
 - Finding students doing something right in the classroom and acknowledging that good behavior to a parent or guardian through a simple email or phone call can go a long way in motivating students to behave.
4. **MISBEHAVIOR.** Teachers need to determine appropriate consequences for misbehavior and apply these consequences **consistently**. Consequences generally follow different levels of severity, escalating to one-on-one conferences with the teacher, detentions, meetings with parents/guardians, etc. Listed below are ten research-based ideas for reducing problem misbehavior through good academic management. It is clear from this list that good teaching is the best way to deter misbehavior. Many of these ideas were published on the website, [Intervention Central](#), "Reducing Problem Behaviors Through Good Academic Management: 10 Strategies." They are augmented by ideas from the authors and other sources of best practices.
- Make sure assigned work is not too easy and not too difficult. Students may become bored and distracted when assignments are not appropriately challenging. However, when an assignment is too hard, students may become frustrated and upset because they cannot complete it.
 - Look for ways for students to have some degree of choice in determining their learning activities. For example, use differentiated teacher/learning activities. Obviously, choices have to be structured on the basis of academic requirements and/or levels. Choices may be given in terms of creating teams for group work, seating, and peer review of their work for some activities.
 - Select high-interest or functional learning activities. Focusing activities on entrepreneurship, sports, etc., may trigger student interest and contribute to the achievement of academic goals.
 - Deliver instruction at a brisk pace to hold student attention. Slow-paced instruction can contribute to behavior problems because students become bored and distracted. "**Teacher talk**" should be minimized; "**student**

participation” should be maximized. The teacher is a facilitator/catalyst. Student instructors can be effective in helping other students understand the requirements. Modify instruction on the basis of and in conjunction with exceptional-learner teachers.

- Structure lessons to require active student involvement. For example, teachers can use digital programs to randomize selection of students for participation. This procedure encourages student involvement and conveys the important fact that all students’ input is valued and expected.
- Use discussion boards to encourage reticent students to contribute their ideas. Padlet is an example of an easy-to-use discussion board.
- Incorporate cooperative learning/active learning opportunities into the instruction. Working in small groups or teams can provide opportunities for students to become actively engaged in their learning, to work with others, and to provide specific kinds of teacher feedback.
- Give frequent feedback and encouragement. Information on providing this kind of feedback is included in the preceding discussion of item 3, page 5.
- Use a teaching process that enables students to understand what is expected of them. Model the process involved and the desired outcome.
- Use quick methods to check on student understanding of instructions; e.g., ask for thumbs up to indicate students understand (or thumbs down to indicate students do not understand) what is expected. When students do not understand the directions given by the teacher, problem behavior is likely to occur. The blog, “[Practical Teaching Tips for Giving Instructions](#)” describes the consequences of a failure to communicate instructions effectively and provides suggestions for giving better instructions. There are many techniques for checking for understanding. The following pdf file from Edutopia, “[53 Ways to Check for Understanding](#)” contains a variety of options for checking for understanding at various points in the completion of an assignment.
- Try to eliminate misbehavior opportunities related to students not bringing necessary items to class, e.g. laptop/tablet, paper or pencils, etc. Provide what is needed so students can take notes or follow through on instructions. (Reinforce the rule to come prepared as supplies are lent to the “forgetful” students.)
- **Be consistent** in managing the academic setting. Teachers should enforce their classroom rules and routines **consistently**.
- Use PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports), a proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture needed for all students in a school to achieve social, emotional and academic success. Attention is focused on creating and sustaining primary (school-wide), secondary (classroom), and tertiary (individual) systems of support that improve lifestyle results (personal, health, social, family, work, and recreation) for all youth by making targeted misbehavior less effective, efficient, and relevant, and desired behavior more functional. [PBIS](#) is a differentiated learning tool.

- Target interventions to coincide closely with the point of performance. If a reward is given, it will have greater impact if it is given close to the student performance with which it is connected.

The article, [7 Classroom Management Components To Reduce Student Discipline](#), focuses on 7 tips for handling/preventing misbehavior problems. Numerous links within the article provide additional information about the tips given. A bottom-line reminder: prior to implementing disciplinary procedures, the approval of the school administration should be obtained.

5. **ENGAGEMENT.** This technique is closely linked to the quality of instruction. Teachers should constantly engage students in class instruction through creating an interesting lesson that holds students' attention and/or through building in frequent opportunities for student participation. Students who are involved in the lesson generally have less inclination to act out. The document in this series titled "Active Learning Strategies" provides many ideas for getting students actively involved in the learning process: it is available on the [IDOE Learning Connection](#).

The NCTQ identified five secondary strategies that should be considered after the Big

Five. These secondary strategies (presented in the NCTQ report, page 5) are listed below:

- **Manage the physical classroom environment.** This technique refers to thinking strategically when setting up the classroom; for example, making certain the teacher can see all students at all times, planning for a smooth flow of traffic for different classroom activities, and considering how to group desks to maximize student engagement. The "withitness" (awareness of what is going on in the classroom at all times) abilities of the teacher should be refined continuously. Additionally, an exciting and engaging classroom décor will enhance student interest in learning.
- **Motivate students.** Rewards for good behavior should be administered in a way that they do not result in only a temporary compliance with classroom management goals for the sole purpose of receiving a reward. Tangible rewards should be based on the quality of a performance, not on the number of times a performance is repeated. The rewards should be reduced through time to encourage the development of students' intrinsic motivation to have good classroom conduct.
- **Use the least intrusive means.** "Least intrusive" refers to using subtle techniques to prevent or quickly halt early signs of misbehavior. These techniques include using teacher proximity, giving a rule reminder, giving a "teacher look," or asking off-task students substantive questions to redirect attention back to the lesson.
- **Involve parents and the school community.** Involvement of parents and the school community in classroom management can be done through email or making phone calls home, meeting with parents in various school organizations or taking other actions that engage stakeholders beyond the classroom.
- **Attend to social/cultural/emotional factors that affect the classroom's social climate.** This interaction technique focuses on maintaining a positive atmosphere in

the classroom and being culturally sensitive. Teachers should demonstrate self-discipline. Labeling students, using sarcasm, and threatening students are inappropriate all the time. Recognizing student feelings, inviting cooperation, and discouraging criticism and arguing are appropriate all the time.

Effective classroom management requires a positive relationship between students and teachers. However, the NCTQ noted that research indicates teachers taking on a “buddy role” do not establish effective teacher-student relationships. Treat all students with respect and show that you are a caring person who deals with all students in a consistent manner. **Do not** be a Facebook or other social media friend of any student. **Do not** show favoritism by giving special treatment to a few students or by letting some students “get a pass” on adhering to rules. Teachers should build constructive relationships that show they are interested in students achieving learning goals and academic expectations. Students need to know a teacher cares about them as people as well as students. The following teacher behaviors may convey the personal interest teachers have in students as individuals; they were cited in *Classroom Management that Works* by Robert J. Marzano, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia, 2003, page 53:

- Talk informally with students before, during, and after class about their interests.
- Greet students outside of school—for instance, at extracurricular events or at stores.
- Single out a few students each day in the lunchroom and talk with them.
- Be aware of and comment on important events in students’ lives, such as participation in sports, drama, or other extracurricular activities.
- Compliment students on important achievements in and outside of school.
- Meet students at the door as they come into class and say hello to each one making sure to use his or her name.

Another useful website for student engagement is [Edutopia, “Student Engagement: Resource Roundup.”](#) This site includes dozens of articles, videos, and other resources which offer strategies and advice for keeping students engaged in learning, thus making teaching strategies more effective and students less likely to become behavior problems.

The characteristics of a well-managed classroom according to Harry and Rosemary Wong (*The First Days of School*, page 86, Harry K. Wong Publications, 1998) are:

- Students are deeply involved with their work, especially with academic teacher-led instruction.
- Students know what is expected of them and generally are successful.
- There is relatively no wasted time, confusion, or disruption.
- The climate of the classroom is work-oriented, but relaxed and pleasant.

“Never going back on your word” is of utmost importance in working with students in classroom management. (Flexibility is necessary; when plans **must be modified** appropriate explanation to students is important.) The article, “[The Biggest First Day of School Mistake You Can Make](#),” illustrates how easy it is to get off track in adhering to classroom procedures and how quickly that slip can snowball into problems of inattention and disrespect.

Additional teaching-learning challenges are discussed in other topics included in this series of papers focus on various aspects of effective teaching (the five papers in this series are available on the [Learning Connection](#)). Where appropriate in these papers, specific applications of classroom management are addressed.

By making students alert to classroom rules and routines and other aspects of classroom management, teachers can maintain the appropriate environment for effective instruction.