

Dealing with a Classroom Crisis

In this *Edutopia* article, Richard Curwin (David Yellin College, Israel) lists the thoughts that often go through a teacher's mind during a major classroom disruption:

- It tries our patience, pushes our limits, and makes us angry.
- It threatens our sense of control.
- We fear looking weak to students.
- We fear that other students may do the same thing if we don't take a strong stance.
- We take it personally.

These thoughts are a recipe for disaster, says Curwin. It's critically important that teachers take a deep breath and strategically divide their response into two parts: (a) Immediate stabilization, and (b) Intervention to resolve the issue.

When first responders (emergency-room medics, firefighters, police officers, and soldiers) confront a crisis, their goal is to stabilize the situation. "The principle of all emergency situations is stop things from getting worse before trying to make them better," says Curwin. "Often teachers try to solve an unstable situation, only to escalate to the point where any intervention might not work. To be stable, both the teacher and student need to be relatively anger free, calm, and willing to listen to the other's point of view. Calming down requires time for both the student and teacher to depersonalize the incident." This approach flies in the face of our desire to solve the problem quickly and move on, but the time spent cooling off ends up saving time.

Minor inappropriate behavior doesn't require this two-step process, but with major disruptions, Curwin suggests the following:

- Stabilizing is not ignoring, excusing, or letting students get away with something; it's strategically deferring the intervention to a more favorable time.
- It's important to convey to students that you're willing to hear their side of the story.
- As best as you can, ascertain the motive for the misbehavior and acknowledge it (without agreeing with the bad choice students made).
- Deflect students' attempts to argue.
- Use humor.

Curwin suggests avoiding the following:

- Criticizing, lecturing, scolding, and blaming;
- Getting into a back-and-forth;
- Saying or implying "No excuses";
- Taking immediate action;
- Embarrassing students or attacking their dignity;
- Demanding, "What did you say?"

Curwin shares three examples and asks us to think of effective interventions to use when things calm down:

- A student swears at a teacher, who responds, “You must be incredibly angry to use that kind of language with me. We need to find a way that is more acceptable to display your anger, but right now, I’m too angry with you to discuss this situation calmly. We must talk later when we are both ready.”

- A student calls another student a name, and that student hits him. The teacher says to the hitter: “You have every right to defend yourself from insults, but hitting isn’t an acceptable method. We need to have a conversation about better ways to solve this problem.”

- A student says, “This class sucks!” in front of the whole class. The teacher says, “I’m sure you have reasons for thinking that, but this is not the time to talk about it. I promise to listen to you after class.”

“Classroom Management: The Intervention Two-Step” by Richard Curwin in *Edutopia*, February 4, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1iw6Bg0>