

More Classroom Management 101

In this *Kappan* article, Jonathan Eckert (Wheaton College, IL) ruefully recalls the first time he was videotaped as a young 4th-grade teacher. Viewing the film later with his cooperating teacher, he was chagrined to see that a lesson that should have taken 10-15 minutes lasted for nearly 45, that most students were not engaged, and that he himself was bored within five minutes. But the coup de grace came when the camera panned to one side of the room and revealed a student lying prone on his desk for nearly five minutes, and Eckert wasn't aware of it until he saw it on video.

Eckert now teaches and coaches novice teachers, and he's put together these hard-earned pointers on classroom management:

- *Maintain a growth mindset.* This means seeing students' intelligence and talents as malleable – and having the same belief about one's own ability as a teacher.
- *Reflect – then reject, accept, or modify.* Teachers must be willing to try new strategies and then decide, based on the evidence (*Are students engaged? Are they learning more? How do I know?*) whether they're worth keeping and developing or should be dumped. One teacher thought she had a great listen-up strategy for her fifth graders by using lines from *The Lego Movie*: she would say “Everything is...” and students chorused, “Awesome!” But over the next few days this deteriorated as students began to continue the song; the teacher backed off and adopted a different method.

Eckert shares his most successful *talk-more-quietly* strategy from his own 5th-grade classroom: he had a picture of Elvis at the front of the room, and when students got too noisy, he would remove a piece of The King's clothing, each piece representing time taken away from their 15-minute Friday afternoon class recess. (Don't worry, the last step was a pair of swimming trunks that couldn't be removed.) “Students got to the point where they would quiet each other down if I even started moving toward Elvis,” says Eckert.

- *Employ extrinsic motivation.* Alfie Kohn's injunction to strive for intrinsic motivation notwithstanding, Eckert believes teachers need to use some extrinsic motivators – but *good* ones – as a pathway to the ultimate goal of learning for learning's sake. As a 7th-grade science teacher, he put students in teams and urged them to earn points for quality lab work, cooperation, and good performance in review games and class. At the end of each quarter, teams that earned the requisite number of points got to participate in extension labs that went beyond the science curriculum – for example, building carbon dioxide-powered cars. Teams that failed to earn enough points had to spend the week in the library writing 1-2-page reports on the science concepts behind the labs. Eckert says that he never had more than one group a year that suffered the library consequence, and after that, students knew he was serious and every team earned their way into the extra labs.

- *Hold their attention.* New teachers tend to believe that classroom management is “a mystical level of nirvana to be achieved without regard for content or pedagogy,” says Eckert.

Not true! An essential, common-sense ingredient is getting students actively involved in high-quality learning experiences. A review game, for example, will work if every student participates in buzzing with their team to get the answer to every question and there are fun rewards for success – not beating other teams but getting to use the basketball hoop, football toss, rubber-band cannon, or remote-control driving course.

- *Be demanding.* New teachers have to understand that when a student says, “She’s mean out of the goodness of her heart,” it’s a high compliment. “The desire to be ‘nice’ becomes very problematic for beginning teachers,” says Eckert, “and one of the primary symptoms is the number of warnings they give. One of the best pieces of advice is that there should be no warnings. Classroom interactions consist of a series of choices and consequences. When beginning teachers see their role as holding students accountable for their work and choices, they stop worrying about being viewed as ‘mean,’ and they stop giving warnings.”

- *Build important relationships.* Teachers need to do this especially well with their most challenging students. A starting point is greeting each student at the classroom door. Eckert required his middle-school students to give him a firm handshake, eye contact, and a meaningful greeting. “In addition to teaching life skills,” he says, “this communicated that whatever had occurred in the hall, in previous classes, or at home, we were going to learn and our relationship was important.” Another strategy is 2-by-10: engaging each struggling student in two minutes of conversation (about anything) for ten consecutive days.

- *Fill the classroom.* “Regardless of personality, introvert or extrovert, the teacher’s presence must permeate the classroom,” says Eckert. “This doesn’t mean that only teachers with outsize personalities can be successful. It means that students need to know that the teacher is always aware.”

“Teach Like a Novice: Lessons From Beginning Teachers” by Jonathan Eckert in *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2014 (Vol. 96, #2, p. 13-18), www.kappanmagazine.org; Eckert can be reached at jon.eckert@wheaton.edu.