

November 1, 2023 • 12 min • Vol. 81 • No. 3

To the Teacher Feeling Unsupported with Student Behavior



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These strategies can get your classroom under control when your administrator can't—or won't—help.

Abstract



PREMIUM RESOURCE

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT





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Abstract

1. Stop sending students to the office.
2. Set expectations all day, every day.
3. Follow through and give grace.
4. Always have a plan.
5. Loop parents in.

This Too Shall Pass

My third year of teaching was like watching an episode of *The Bachelor*. It was often so terrible that it was hard to look away, because I'd be compelled to find out what strange thing might happen next. Imagine an episode where two students

are giggling across the room. The camera zooms in to show one of them trying to break markers to get the ink stick out. In the chaos that is the rest of the classroom, I (their teacher) finally see the teal puddle on the floor, start yelling, and send the ink-stained student to the office. Cut to commercial break, and when the show returns, the student is laughing with the principal in his office and skipping back to class. As the viewer, you might shout at the TV: "No way! There is no support for that teacher from school administration!"

And you would be right. As a new teacher, I didn't feel like I had much support with student discipline from my administration. My first two years were tough, but that third year nearly broke me. I had students talking back and outright refusing to listen. I came across more defiance and more going on behind my back than in years prior. Even the other teachers on my team, who had at least 10 years more classroom management experience than I did, admitted that my year-three group of students was one of the most challenging behaviorally that they'd ever encountered. I couldn't always figure out who exactly was starting or provoking classroom misbehavior, and I felt overwhelmed, exhausted, and hopeless. I also resorted to yelling occasionally... which was embarrassing and ineffective. And when I'd send students to the office, more often than not they'd come back with a hug and a Starburst. Like it was a *reward*!



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Now, to be fair, I think a lot of administrators have the best intentions, but they are pulled in so many directions that they expect teachers to step in and manage certain issues themselves when possible, including classroom discipline. I had to learn quickly how to implement a positive classroom management system that helped me shape student behavior into what I wanted. And after surviving that year, I realized that it *is* the teacher's job to teach and correct student behavior in the classroom, not the campus administrator's job. Teachers have to do the legwork, so when they do need an administrator to step in, they can outline all the tools and strategies they have already tried so the administrator can understand why help is truly needed.

So, how did I learn to manage my classroom without support from school administration? I implemented five practical steps to help me curb classroom behavior issues and invoke a positive classroom culture. These five steps are not ones I discovered all at once, but strategies I developed and refined throughout my years of teaching.

1. Stop sending students to the office.

You should address and work to solve any behavior you possibly can in your own classroom. Once I sent a student to the office who wouldn't stop looking at their phone, and when they returned, it was with a sticky note from the office assistant that said, "I let them keep their phone. Come see me when you have a minute,

and I'll explain." Turns out the student had been texting their mom about an afterschool activity, and although the principal had told the student to put the phone away in the future, she let them keep it. I felt so helpless and angry, and the student felt like they won.

Sending students to the office is a temporary solution, and you begin to undermine your own authority when you send students out. They know you can't, or maybe won't, do anything about their behavior and will continue to act out. By managing behavior in the classroom, you actually build better relationships with your students and help them understand what is appropriate and what is not.



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One year, I had a class where the majority of the boys were all very good friends. They didn't break any big rules, but their small misbehaviors were collectively big disruptions. One week, I ended up calling the parents of 17 of the boys to let them know about the behaviors in class. From that point on, I could look at the boys and

say, "Do I need to call your mom?" They'd shake their heads *no* and get back to what they were supposed to be doing.

The point was not to shame them, but to let them know I care about how they do in my classroom. How can I expect a student to think they're worth my time if I send them out instead of spending time to talk to them, redirect them, and give them a chance to get back on track? How can I expect students to want to behave in my classroom if every time they misbehave, they get to go get a drink, meet up with a friend, and go to the bathroom on their way to the office?

Addressing student behavior in class is hard. But we can't expect kids to do the work of changing their behavior if we don't work with them. Giving them consequences in the classroom helps them know that next time something happens, we'll address that, too.

2. Set expectations all day, every day.

I could talk about expectations all day long. It's the bread and butter of my classroom management style. Never stop setting expectations. When you feel like you have no support from school administration, telling kids what you expect of them gives them the opportunity to act appropriately.

During transitions, I used to say something like, "Get into your groups. Are we good? Any questions? Go." Then, a flurry of chaos would ensue. A chair would fall because someone jumped up, one student would run across the room because he was racing a friend to see who could get to the lab table first, and 10 minutes later, another student would realize that they didn't have a pencil.

I soon discovered I should be setting expectations rather than giving vague directions. Instead of just telling them to go to their lab tables, I needed to explain how I wanted them to behave on the way and what they needed to bring with

them. My "go to your lab tables" direction turned into a short monologue that sounded something like this: "Hold up your pencil. Hold up your notebook. You need to bring both of those with you to your lab table. When you move to your groups, push in your chair and make sure your stuff is off the floor so we have clear walkways. I expect you are walking to your groups, keeping your hands, feet, and pencils to yourself."

Reminding students what the expectations are right before a transition happens helps keep the whole thing smooth. If you have specific students you know struggle with certain transition points, you can remind them individually in a brief, casual way. ("Jordan, you're going to walk, not run, right?") But make sure if you are doing this, you give these kinds of specific requests to several students to keep any from feeling targeted.

3. Follow through and give grace.

When you're learning how to handle your classroom, follow-through is your most important tool. You can set expectations with students all you want, but if you don't follow through when those expectations are not met, they're worthless.

Follow-through does not equal discipline. Your students will do things incorrectly, but every little thing students do wrong should not be met with an iron fist. If you try to control everything, you will lose your mind. When students do something wrong, give them a little bit of grace—resist the urge to yell and scream. Build consequences into your expectations instead.

For example, in my classroom, I ask students listening to headphones to have their volume set so no one else can hear their music and they can hear me talking in a normal voice. This is what I might say to build a consequence into my expectation: "If I or anyone else can hear your music through your headphones,

you will have to put your phone away for the rest of class." Then, my students know what I want and what happens if they decide not to follow the expectation.

If they don't follow the expectation and I can hear their music from across the room, I get their attention without disrupting the rest of the class. I calmly ask them if they remember the expectation. If they say no, I remind them what it was. (And yes, many times I know they remember it even if they say they don't, but my goal is to build trust and not get them in trouble.) Next, I ask them to put their phone and headphones in their backpack because they didn't meet the expectation. If they say no, I take a deep breath, collect my thoughts, and stay calm. I get on their level—squat down next to them, pull up a chair, or maybe even ask them to come see me in a corner or step outside—and say, "I told you what would happen if I could hear your music. At this point, you have two choices. You can put your phone in your backpack and get back to work. Making a good decision like this lets us continue with both of our jobs. If you choose *not* to put it in your backpack, I'll have to call home after school to talk about how we can be sure expectations are followed." Ninety-seven percent of the time, kids don't want to be in trouble at home and will make a good decision.

In those few cases when a quick conversation doesn't work, I take it a step further. If the student still says they're not giving up their phone, I keep in mind what the school discipline plan is. I might respond with something like, "OK, if you're choosing to not put your phone in your backpack, I can't make you. After school and before I call your parents, I'm going to go talk with the vice principal to make a plan so you can manage your phone appropriately. If you want to use your phone, you have to follow the expectations. You can go back to your seat and take a minute to decide if that's what you really want to happen."



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Students want to make good choices. Most of the time, if you can give them an out without involving their parents or administration, they will take it. You've spoken to them respectfully and they feel you're not out to get them in trouble. Those who do not make a good choice are probably the students you struggle with a lot. In those cases, it depends on each student and each situation. You can ignore the behavior until the end of the day and then follow through with parents and admin or invoke your campus discipline policy to remove the student from your classroom. If you've talked to them, given them several options, and they still refuse to comply, you can go to your administration with the steps you took and ask them to take action.

4. Always have a plan.

I'm sure you've heard the saying, *If you don't have a plan, your students will have one for you.* It's true. When you are pulling out lab equipment last-minute or trying to find the other half-stack of copies you set down somewhere, students have a lot more time to get into trouble. The more planned and organized you are for the day, the less likely your students are to goof off. Furthermore, if you know what

your transitions are, write out expectations for each one—because let's be real... it's hard to remember everything you want to say—and communicate those expectations to your students. This will shift the whole dynamic of your classroom. Hello, structure; goodbye, chaotic mess.

5. Loop parents in.

When you feel like you have no support from your school administration, keeping in contact with parents is a must. Requirement. Non-negotiable. In my experience, most parents I talk to assume that if they are not hearing from their student's teacher, their student's behavior is fine. We as teachers don't always reach out because we have a lot on our plates, but we need to remember a parent might feel blindsided if they think everything's fine and then it's suddenly not. Our school leaders need us to take the small step of communicating with parents before little problems, like talking too much or going to the bathroom for seven minutes every class period, turn into bigger problems later. If you've tried to work it out with the student by chatting with them or embedding natural classroom consequences and you're still not seeing a change, it's time to call or email their parents. Get them involved. Almost every single parent I've talked to (and trust me, I've talked to a lot) has been supportive and helpful. At least they try their best to be, and that's really all you can ask.

Not a single administrator I've worked with would try to help me solve a problem with a student if I haven't at minimum attempted to reach their parents. After you've tried to solve your behavior problems in your classroom and communicated with parents, your administrator is much more likely to help. Quite honestly, they have more ability to help.

This Too Shall Pass

When you've tried everything and feel like you're out of options, it can be overwhelming. You may think about quitting teaching altogether, that it is not your thing. When this happens, take a deep breath and remember: You will not have this group of students forever. Tell yourself whatever you need to get through the day. I have had some difficult years and survived through them. When I have a class with students that give me grief, I look at the clock and think, *17 more minutes today, or there are only 7 more Mondays*. Seven Mondays sounds easier than 36 days, right?

The hard truth is that even when you've done all the right things, sometimes your principal still can't—or won't—help. Like I mentioned in the introduction, my third year of teaching was atrocious. I was looking to leave the profession. With no way out, and my 17th student coming back from the office with a Starburst, I decided that I was not going to let these kids get the better of me, and I was not going to rely on the office. That year royally sucked.

But you know what? The next year was my best year. I grew so much in learning how to handle behavior in my classroom that I knew how to squash problems before they started and how to manage them when they showed up. (Mostly. There are still *those* days. There always will be.)

Have a plan. Set expectations. Follow through when they're not met. Talk to parents. Control what you can. You'd be surprised at how much these small changes together can really transform your classroom and help you feel like you can take control, even without support from your administration.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this article appeared on the author's website, [Super Sass and Science Class](#).