

# MANAGING 21st CENTURY CLASSROOMS

*How do I avoid ineffective classroom  
management practices?*

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## The Challenge of Classroom Management

You've probably already figured this out: despite the enormous amount of planning and preparation teachers do, instruction is actually the easy part.

See if this sounds familiar: you spend hours designing that perfect lesson. You bring in enrichment activities and related literature, and you're able to make adjustments for kids who need to go back and fill in a few pieces they missed along the way. Your directions are clear, your materials are organized (maybe even color-coded), and you have backup plans in case the lesson runs short. You are enthusiastic and well prepared.

And yet . . .

You're having trouble getting your students to settle down, stop talking, or even get in their seats. One student wants to go to the bathroom while another needs to sharpen a pencil. There's a student making noises, another poking the child in the next seat, and a few others distracted with unrelated tasks or staring off into space. And then there's that seemingly interested child who asks a question that somehow gets you off track, heading in an entirely different direction from the one you had planned.

Let's not forget the students who can't focus because they're hungry, didn't get enough sleep, or are fuming over a

nasty encounter they had on the way to your class. There are a few kids who love the topic but need something to do with their hands or their bodies to stay attentive, and some who just can't sit still for one more minute. Add in the students who gave up before they even walked into your class and the ones easily provoked to arguments, defiance, outbursts, or violence, and I suspect that you're not only struggling to accomplish any of the instructional goals you've set, but also going home at the end of the day feeling frustrated, angry, and a bit defeated.

## A Big-Picture Issue

Uncooperative student behavior is only one of several reasons why so many teachers are leaving the profession. Of all the reasons mentioned in research surveys and interviews, however, this one consistently appears at the top of the list and is mentioned as a significant source of frustration for many people in the field (Bluestein, 2010).

I believe this happens for a number of reasons. For one, we tend to think of uncooperative or disruptive behavior as something we need to *react* to, and most recommendations we receive, if we actually get any training in this area at all, tend to emphasize a “what-do-I-do-when . . .” approach to classroom management. Unfortunately, the fact that so many

of these strategies either do not work or actually make things worse has not seemed to diminish our reliance on them.

We come from a culture that tends to look at situations through an all-or-nothing lens: either *we* are in control or *they* are. We also have traditions that require assigning blame and exacting some type of punishment when infractions occur. Our most familiar classroom management practices reflect a win-lose slant that leaves little room for an approach that would accommodate the teacher's need for authority *as well as* students' need for autonomy within limits (which they likewise need). In this traditional context, it's easy to assume that anything short of an ironhanded, authoritarian attitude toward discipline is flat-out permissive, although this common belief is not remotely true.

Another factor in our difficulty with classroom management is the dissonance between the rapid pace of change in our culture—socially, technologically, and economically, for a start—and the decades-old curriculum, instruction, and management techniques that still form the foundation of our educational systems. For example, consider the rapid shift we have made from the uniformity inherent in an industrial society to the very different needs of one built to deliver information and services. Although assembly-line jobs have all but disappeared from the United States and many other developed countries, the factory-era notion of standardization, especially in curriculum and assessment, remains an intractable cornerstone of how we push kids through school (Bluestein, 1988, 2008, 2010).

Although young people once depended on a handful of adults to give them information on every subject, nowadays an entire world of data and resources is only a click away. Author and educator Sir Ken Robinson suggests that one of the problems with current attempts at school reform around the world is that “they’re trying to meet the future by doing what they did in the past. And on the way, they’re alienating millions of kids who don’t see any purpose in going to school.” He also notes that “our children are living in the most intensely stimulating period in the history of the earth. They’re being besieged with information . . . and we’re penalizing them for getting distracted” from what he refers to as “boring stuff at school” (RSA, 2010). Long for the “good old days” all you want, but there is no going back. It’s long past time for our interactive and instructional strategies to catch up to the kids we’re teaching—and to the marketplace for which we are ostensibly preparing them.

When we actually do get down to talking about classroom management, our focus tends to be far too narrow. We need to look at this topic from a big-picture perspective. A truly effective approach requires us to pay attention not just to student behavior and power dynamics but also to the pace and content of the curriculum, the social and emotional climate of the classroom, students’ belief in their ability to achieve academic success, and the methods of instruction that make sense to the ways individual students learn. *All* of these ingredients affect student behavior, and each one is an important part of an effective approach to classroom management.