



In the Zone: Creating Flow and Momentum in Your Classroom

If you were asked what is the first and foremost responsibility of a classroom teacher, what would your response be? If you said to provide a safe environment for students, then you would be correct. Unless the students feel safe in the learning environment, they are not going to engage in learning. Once accomplished, teaching and learning happen. Effective classroom management centers on creating structures for students to feel connected to you, your classroom, the school and learning

Effective teachers often say positive parent engagement lends itself to effective classroom management and this is true; however, classroom management is more than just engaged parents and it is much more than managing disciplinary issues when they arise. Classroom management is the relationship between managing people, time, space, and resources. Effective classroom management creates the momentum and flow in your classroom that make instruction effective and learning happen.

What are momentum and flow? Think of momentum as the energy in your classroom. It is the development of events in a learning situation that lend strength and force to instruction. Flow is the state of involvement in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that it is done for the sheer sake of doing it. In other words, both teacher and students are in their “zones” for learning.

Key elements of effective classroom management are community; rules, routines, and procedures; reinforcements; and smooth transitions. Other elements, such as dealing with disruptive behavior will be discussed in a separate section. It does bears repeating that engaging parents in their child's learning has a positive impact on classroom management.

When planning for classroom management - **and YES, you do have to plan for it** - it is important to remember that your focus is on your students and their learning rather than on control and compliance. Treat your students with the respect you want others to show you and you increase the likelihood your students will learn from your example of positive behavior. Observing appropriate behavior and seeing its impact serves as a powerful motivator for students.

Community

Your classroom is a community - a community of learners with a teacher and other educators who may "visit" from time to time. Community begins by taking the time to get to know your students, letting them get to know one another, and letting them get to know you. Obviously, you do need to establish parameters as your engagement with them must always be on a professional level reflecting positive teacher-student interactions. In any community, boundaries are important and play a significant role in establish respect for one another. Your classroom community is no different.

Community also requires you to engage in two distinct yet interrelated practices: establishing dominance and maintaining community. A community without structure and rules is chaotic. In establishing dominance, you establish yourself as the head of the community, which you are. Maintaining community provides opportunities for everyone to bond with one another. Here are some ways in which you establish dominance and maintain community.

Establishing Dominance

Know, understand, and implement school and district guidelines for discipline procedures.

Provide a list of standards and consequences to parents and students. Make sure they are consistent with district and building policy. When in doubt, ask a colleague or your principal and make sure you share a copy with your principal, too.

Keep your classroom orderly. Maintain a cheerful and attractive classroom rather than a disorderly one which might encourage disruptive behavior. An orderly classroom makes it easier for all students to access instruction and resources necessary to support learning.

Begin class on time and in a businesslike manner. The most significant transition issue in any classroom is the teacher not being ready to begin instruction. Have activities known as "bell ringers" for the students so learning begins as soon as they enter the classroom. This establishes the expectation that learning is a priority.

Learn the meaning of terms, especially slang used by students. This serves a number of purposes one of which allows you to identify potential issues that a student may be having so you can act proactively. It also lets the students know that you are not a pushover who easily gets lost in the lingo of today's young people.

Don't threaten or use sarcasm. Never use threats to enforce discipline. If you make a threat, make sure you can carry through on it. Likewise, never humiliate a child or expose one to embarrassment or disparagement. Again, treat your students with the same level of courtesy and respect you expect and want other to treat you.

Avoid arguing with students. Discussions about classwork are invaluable, but arguments can become emotional encounters and inevitably lead to winners and losers. Whenever a teacher argues with a student the teacher loses. If a

student wants to argue, schedule a time to talk with the student away from classmates. This gives you control of the situation.

Address discipline issues calmly, quietly, and privately. The last thing you need or want is for a disciplinary situation to grow out of control. So long as you maintain a calm demeanor, address the student quietly and, preferably, privately the situation will remain under your control.

Play the traffic cop and be mobile. Walk around the room as students work or respond to instruction. Just as the presence of a police car will cause traffic to slow down to the speed limit, your presence around the room will minimize disruptive behavior.

Grade assignments and return them as soon as possible. Students have a need and a right to know how they are doing in class. Don't make them wait. When you return their work in a timely manner, it shows them you care, you value their work, and you respect their effort.

Keep rules simple. Establish as few classroom rules as possible, and keep them simple. Always remember, though, the power of any rule depends on whether or not it is enforced.

Attend more fully. Secure more information from the student on who, what, when, where, and why. Be objective rather than emotional. Remember, at all times, you are the adult in the classroom.

Spell out consequences CLEARLY. When a situation threatens to get out of hand, making learning impossible or risking harm to someone, very clearly explain to the student(s) involved the consequences of his/her actions and your intent to follow through and make sure you do so.

Maintain a record of what happened, when, where, who was involved, what you did, and who witnessed the incident.

Expect the unexpected. Schedules will change without warning and unanticipated events

may occur. Be flexible in responding to the unexpected. Your flexibility sends a signal to students, some of whom may be anxious, that everything is going to be fine. The learning will continue.

Creating and Maintaining Community

Be fair, positive, and consistent. Be the kind of person young people like and trust—firm, fair, friendly, courteous, enthusiastic, and confident.

Get to know your students. Learn their names quickly and use them in and out of class. Greet them when they come into the room. There is nothing more affirming than being called by our own name, especially when someone else has misbehaved.

Make learning enjoyable. Make education interesting and relevant to the students' lives. Poor planning and a full curriculum can provoke disruptions.

Praise good work, good responses, and good behavior.

Let the students know you care. Determine jointly with the class what is acceptable in terms of behavior and achievement and what is not.

- Show interest in what students say, whether or not it pertains directly to the lesson.
- Treat students with the same respect you expect from them.
- Keep their confidence unless doing so places or keeps them in harm way.

Give reasonable assignments. Don't use schoolwork as punishment and give clear directions and expectations for completing assignments.

Set aside one rule for the students to make. Students should have ownership in at least one class rule. Let them, as a class decide what that rule will be.

Listen to and hear their grievances and concerns, the same as you want yours heard.

A sense of community is paramount; however, as a teacher you need to recognize that your students are at different levels of needs within your classroom community. Our students come into our classrooms with different needs, wants, and aspirations. When you get to know your students, you find out a lot of things about them - some you may not want to know; some you need to treat with confidentiality; and others that need or require the intervention of other personnel in the school or the community.

The following hierarchy of student needs provides insight into where students are in your classroom. It helps you identify supports, differentiate instruction, and put into place structures that help all of your students advance to the top of the hierarchy. This is critical. When your appraiser comes into your classroom for an observation, the unwritten expectation is that all students will be self-directed and self-engaged in their own learning and this includes managing their own behavior.

Hierarchy of Student Needs



Students at the bottom of the pyramid come to school and literally struggle for their own **survival**. This may be due to a high level of food insecurity resulting in hunger; fear of bullying taking place at school; abuse/neglect at home; or some other factor, such as homelessness. These may be students for whom there is little you can do other than provide moral support and engage

Be fair to your students.

At times, students may question whether or not you are fair so here are some ways to help you win and maintain the respect of your students:

- Be consistent in application of discipline and just in your requirements and assignment
- Never refuse letting a student tell you his or her side of the situation.
- Be willing to consider mitigating circumstances.
- Don't talk about the misdeeds of students except to those who have a right to know.
- Don't openly compare one pupil to another
- Apologize if you've treated a student unjustly.
- Make sure discipline is appropriate for the misbehavior and explain to the student why he or she is being punished.

proper services in the school community are notified and engaged. Always make sure you act in the best interests of your students.

*As an FYI, you have an affirmative responsibility to report suspected abuse or neglect. When a student tells you he or she is being abused or neglected, please contact the Child Protective Services in your area. If you have questions, please contact the **TSTA Help Center** at **1-877-ASK-TSTA (877-275-8787)**.*

When students feel confident that school is a place where they can survive, they focus on their **safety**. They may avoid certain situations or tasks they sense put them in jeopardy. It may be one involving another student or adult in the environment; or it may be one where they avoid certain learning activities for fear of failure. These students often need assurances to bolster confidence to encourage success or that

perceived threats are minimized or eliminated.

In situations where students are being bullied, please make sure you act in compliance with the district's anti-bullying policy and inform the appropriate personnel on your campus.

Once students feel safe in the classroom community, they will begin the **bonding** process with other students. They will appear to be more comfortable with others and begin to take needed risks in learning. They may still have some uncertainty or insecurity about what is happening in the classroom but they will begin to develop the sense that your class is a place where they belong. Please keep in mind that just because a student is bonding with others in your classroom does not minimize the survival or safety factors; rather, it merely points out that you have created a safe environment for learning and the student recognizes it. Survival and safety threats may still exist in a student's community outside of your classroom so do not lose sight of that.

As students bond with one another, they form and become a part of your learning **community**. Like a resident of any community, they begin to take ownership for their own self and begin to hold others accountable for their behavior and actions as well. They regulate their behavior and that of their peers and they also have expectations that they will be treated fairly and consistently in accordance with the norms or the rules of the community.

Lastly, as active members of this community, they begin to **self-direct** their own learning and behavior. Their level of engagement is focused and their effort maximized. This is not to say there won't be issues along the way. Just as the flow and momentum of a river may be impeded by the presence of boulders, so too, may the flow and momentum in your classroom be impeded at times; however, when students are self-engaged and self-directed, the likelihood is considerably less than it would be otherwise.

Rules, Routines, and Procedures

Rules, routines, and procedures provide structure and order to your classroom. Rules establish the expectations for behavior and identify consequences when broken; routines are the rhythm of the classroom that specify a sequence of daily events necessary to the effective management of the classroom, such as how students enter the classroom and put their personal belongings away; and procedures are the administrative or even small tasks that lead to the completion of a larger one, such as transitioning into a group activity. Some teachers make the error that students should learn how to "do school" in the early grades but this is not the case.

By the time a student enters the high school, she or he may have had 30 or more teachers with different rules, routines, and procedures. Each classroom is different and when students enter it for the first time, they still have to learn the rules, routines, and procedures for that particular class just like a tourist has to learn the appropriate norms when traveling in a different place.

Order helps us make sense of what is happening and this is the primary purpose for having clearly defined rules, routines, and procedures. Here are some pointers on who to effectively establish rules, routines, and procedures in your classroom. A good place to begin is to think about what students should know when they are in your classroom. This will help you map out movement and procedures as well as what you need to incorporate into planning the first few days of school to teach your students about their learning community and your classroom.

Students should know:

- Where to get materials.
- What to do if they have a question
- Where to work.
- Where to put finished work.
- What the classroom rules are.
- How to focus on the task.

- What the limitations are.
- If and why the teacher is unavailable.

Rules

Keep it simple. Limit the number of rules to no more than five or six. This makes it easier for you and the students to remember the rules and for you to identify which rules may have been broken when a student misbehaves.

Focus on expectations. Frame rules using positive language to establish the expectations for behavior. “Walk in the hallway” tells students they need to walk in the hallway whereas “No running in the hallway” tells them they cannot run in the hall but they can jump, crawl, or do anything else in the hallway. The rules clarify expectations for how they should act.

Accentuate the positive. The best time to reinforce a rule is when someone is following them as it provides an example of good behavior.

Publicize, Publicize, Publicize. Post the rules in a prominent place in your classroom for easy reference and visibility. Remember to share them with others in the school community, including parents, because the rules establish expectations for behavior in your classroom and these expectations extend to everyone who enters your classroom.

Clarify Understanding. Take time to review the rules and discuss them with your students. Talk about what the rules look like in action, even using demonstrations. Discuss how following the rules symbolize respect for the community of learners and the learners themselves and let the students talk, illustrate, or write about what respect looks like.

If it’s broken, fix it. Rules are not set in stone and if you have a rule that isn’t working, change it or eliminate it. The rules have to work for you and your classroom. When you change one or eliminate it, have a conversation with your students about it including why it is being done.

Voice+Choice=Loyalty. Students are much

more likely to take ownership of the rules if they have some say in them. This does not mean let them make the rules; rather, talk about a situation that may occur and brainstorm possible rules to establish the expectation for behavior in that situation and then let the class vote on it.

Different Places, Different Rules. Students need to understand the many different rules that apply to different parts of the school community. For instance, you want students to walk quietly in the hallway; however, you want them to be able to run and play outside during recess and talk to one another in the cafeteria during lunch (it is, after all, a social time).

Routines

Go Slow to Go Fast. Take time at the beginning of the year to teach your students the routines of your classroom. They have to learn them just as they have to learn content so don’t “assume” they will learn them by watching. Teach them and let them demonstrate mastery by doing. Once routines are mastered, then the momentum of learning content gradually picks up steam.

Sequence Routines. Routines are sequences of movement used in our daily lives and this sequence spills over into how our “space” is organized. Organize your classroom to reflect the routines and movement of the students. If students are expected to put personal belongings away when entering the classroom, then make sure their lockers or storage bins are located convenient to the door of the classroom and away from the learning center so as not to distract students.

Keep routines routine. Make sure the routines you expect students to adopt are constant with few, if any, changes. Frequent changes to routines make them less routine and adds a layer of learning that can take away from learning content.

Procedures

Talk the Talk While You Walk the Walk. Some procedures have to be done regularly, such

as taking attendance, addressing tardies, sending students to the office or clinic, etc. How to do these need to be taught as well. The first times they happen, talk about them and why you have to do them. It helps the students understand the significance of these seemingly insignificant tasks.

Map the Building. Students will come and go in your classroom during the school day - as a whole group, small group, or even individually. They need to know the “map” of the building. Spend some time taking your students on a tour of the building, showing them where the library is, where to go if they’re sick or need to take their medication, where the office is, and so forth. Let students who already know the building lead the tour.

Practice Makes Safe. The best time to practice for a fire drill is before the drill itself. Walk your students through a fire drill, letting them practice lining up and showing them the closest exits to the room. Make sure they know where all the exits are in the event the one closest to them is blocked. They also need to learn and practice other safety drills and evacuations.

Who’s Who. Schools are people places and often times a specific procedure may involve another person in the school environment. Make sure your students know all the people who work in the school - the custodians, the food service workers, administrative staff, support staff, other professional staff. Just as your classroom is a learning community, the school is one, too, and includes people who carry out different functions during the school day. When students recognize who is a part of the school community it strengthens their connectedness to it. Make sure your students know who is who on your campus, knows what they do, and respects them for what they do.

Reinforcements

Reinforce positive behavior. Students need to see good behavior in action. Do not wait until someone misbehaves to reinforce a rule.

Think SEAT. Students typically misbehave for one of our reasons: to satisfy a **S***ENSATION*; to **E***SCAPE* a situation; to seek **A***TTENTION*; or to gain something **I***NTANGIBLE*. Make an effort to identify the student’s primary motivator to misbehave and then make sure you do not inadvertently reinforce it. The **Motivation Assessment Scale** in this survival guide can be used to identify the primary motivating factor for student misbehavior.

Transition from Tangible to Intangible.

Tangible reinforcers are easy and most of us readily identify with them. Giving someone something when they do something we like is one of the basics of human conditioning; however, the potency of any tangible reinforcer is short-lived. Tangible reinforcers tend to become rote and expected with the individual expecting a larger “payday” over time. They also stifle the sense of delayed gratification one achieves by having to wait. In order to make the transition, students have to possess (1) the skill set to accomplish the task or achieve the outcome; AND (2) experience episodic success when doing it. Make sure your students know how to do what they’re expected to do and are beginning to experience success doing it as you phase out any type of tangible reinforcer. If you do it prematurely, you may be setting the students up for failure and setting back any progress they have made.

Engage Parents. Often times, asking a parent what their child enjoys or likes to do can make a world of difference in how the child behaves in class, especially if it is offered as a special activity for a job well done.

Smooth Transitions

Many events happen during the course of a school day and often it may seem to be one transition after another. A transition is any time some sort of change happens. It may be as insignificant as a student raising a hand to get assistance on an activity, as significant as the whole class leaving the classroom for lunch, or anything in-between. They happen and how you control them impacts how your students react to them.

Think about the following transition issues and identify steps you would take to minimize the impact they have on time for learning. Write your suggestions on a piece of paper, in the notes app on your mobile device or anywhere you can access them. Review them periodically and see what is and what isn't working. Lastly, as you review this list, try to identify the one that is the most common yet most preventable transition issue.

Transition Problems

1. A few students always seem to be slow during transitions delaying the rest of the class
2. Students frequently find reasons to wander during transitions.
3. The teacher delays the beginning of activities to look for materials, finish attendance reporting, return or collecting papers, or chat with individual students while other students wait.
4. Students talk loudly at the beginning of the period. The teacher is interrupted while checking attendance, and the start of content activities is delayed.
5. Students socialize too much during transitions, especially after an assignment has been given, but before they have begun working on it. Many students do not start their assignment for several minutes.
6. Students stop working well before the end-of- period bell. They then engage in excessive talking and inappropriate behavior.
7. Whenever the teacher attempts to move the students from one activity into another, a number of students don't make the transition but continue working on the preceding activity. This delays the start of the new activity or results in confusion.
8. While the teacher gives directions during a transition, many students do not pay attention. They continue to put their materials away or get out new materials.

Did you figure out which one is the most common and the most easily preventable? If you said #3, then you are correct. The one person in the classroom whose behavior you do have 100% control of is your own. Just as you have an

expectation for students entering your classroom ready-to-learn they, too, have an expectation for you to be ready-to-teach when they enter. When you're not ready, you signal them that learning and instruction are not important activities.

Here are some beneficial tips for transitions.

Too Much is Never Enough. Over-prepare. It is much better to run out of time than to run out of learning activities. Downtime often serves as an open door to misbehavior so make sure you maintain a high level of engagement with your students. Create the expectation that learning is always taking place through the use of bell-ringers when students come into the classroom and sponge activities for students to do when they have completed their work and are waiting to go to the next learning activity.

SALAMI. "**S**top **A**nd **L**ook **A**t **M**e **I**mmediately." Make use of words or phrase to get students attention. For instance, teach students that when you are standing in a certain place and say "**SALAMI**" they are to stop what they are doing and pay attention to you.

Be Prepared. The number one transition issue in a classroom is the teacher not being ready to teach. You want your students to have the expectation they come to class ready to learn and you want them to have the expectation you are ready to teach. Make sure all of your materials, resources, and technology are ready to go BEFORE students come into your classroom. This includes making sure the technology is working properly so you can resolve any issues with connections.

Early Bird or Night Owl. Know who you are and how your internal clock functions. If you are the teacher who arrives at school early, then you have the luxury of time in the morning before school begins to get everything ready and organized for a day of learning. If, on the other hand, you are a night owl who prefers to stay late after school, then make sure you have everything ready and organized for the next day before you leave work at the end of the day.

Signs, Symbols, and Signals. Make use of signs, symbols, and signals to get students attention; to do a quick assessment of learning; to identify who needs assistance, etc. This saves your voice, keeps extraneous noise to a minimum and is an effective means to "survey the landscape" with a glance around the room. Teach students the meaning of and how to use any signs, symbols, or signals and be aware of any that may carry a cultural significance so as not to offend anyone - and this means knowing your students.

You will give directions to students and how you give these directions can and will have a significant impact on how students respond to them. Properly given directions often mean the difference between an orderly response by the students as they carry them out or complete and utter chaos.

Here are some directions for giving directions.

Plan your directions ahead of time. This is a part of the planning process. As you plan instruction, visualize how activities will take place in your classroom. Consider what the movement will look like and how students will access resources and materials for the activity. Then frame the direction you need to give to make sure it happens in an orderly manner.

Use three (3) step directions. Limiting the number of directions in a sequence makes it easier for students to carry them out. Also, as you give the students directions, make sure you have their attention.

Give directions immediately before the activity. Directions not only need to be relevant to what the students are doing, they also need to be timely.

Get the attention of every student BEFORE giving directions. Make sure the students DO NOT begin to carry out directions while you are still giving them. This can lead to confusion.

Get feedback from students. If your students seem confused as they carry out your directions,

use it as a learning tool and ask them to identify any problems they may have had understanding and following the directions.

Tell them and show them. If the direction requires students to carry out a specific task, like proper use and storage of chemicals, make sure you not only tell them but also show them. Seeing how something is done is much more powerful than being told how something is done.

Keep your voice calm. Do not talk above the students. You are much better off by not talking when they aren't listening and paying attention than you are trying to speak above them. Remember, directions serve a purpose. When you have to speak in a louder, more agitated manner, you begin to open the door to chaos and confusion and when those doors happen, it's often difficult to get them to close.

Consider using signals for whole class response. This is an excellent way to survey the class to see who gets it, and who doesn't get it.

- Thumbs up = yes
- Thumps down = no
- Fist = question or I don't know

Planning for classroom management is as critical to the quality of learning in your classroom as planning for instruction. The two serve as mutual partners in establishing a community of learners. A well-managed classroom will not completely eliminate misbehavior; however, it will minimize it and help create increased student ownership in how they act in the classroom.

Just as a highly-conditioned athlete gets in a zone, so to do teachers and students. Effective and well-planned classroom management creates the flow and momentum necessary to bring you and your students into the proper zone for learning.