The Secret to Classroom Management
by Bob Sornson

There is a secret to classroom management. You won't find it in most of the books on classroom discipline or the endless lists of classroom management tips. Here is a hint: It is far more important than any single strategy for managing students.

Teachers want students to be calm, focused, persistent, and to show the ability to work hard for future reward. With these characteristics in place, students are far more likely to respect classroom rules and procedures, respect adult authority, have positive peer interactions, and learn in our classrooms. These students demonstrate self-regulation, the capacity to adjust their emotions, bodies, and behavior to meet the needs of the situation; in this example they have adjusted to the expectations and needs of the classroom.

Behavior management strategies are designed to help kids learn to self-regulate, but any list of strategies will be much less successful without the secret ingredient. I will use my own list of favorite strategies to illustrate the point. My list of strategies describes what effective classroom managers do, but none of these important strategies for managing students is the secret to a calm, effective classroom culture. In fact, nothing we do to kids is the key to a highly effective classroom.

The secret, of course, is in how we manage ourselves. The effective teacher chooses to be calm, even in the face of challenge. The effective teacher is assertive, persistent, and focused on building a place where social and academic learning can flourish. The effective teacher offers respect to others, in all circumstances and every day. To be a highly effective classroom manager, a teacher must first develop
the capacity to regulate herself to stay in the calm, assertive, respectful state while meeting the challenges of modern teaching.

Every behavior management technique works better for a teacher who is in the calm, assertive, respectful, self-regulated state.

One of the most important techniques for classroom management is building connections with students every single day. The most effective teachers use eye contact, smiles, call kids by name, and purposely build an emotional connection; and they do this in an authentic calm assertive respectful state. Students can easily tell which teachers are the genuine, calm, strong models they want in their lives.

Another high-impact technique for classroom management is to carefully describe, model, and practice desired classroom procedures until they become automatic classroom routines for every single student. Self-regulated educators don’t get easily flustered by the occasional behavioral challenge. They just get back to work and re-establish classroom routines after every long weekend and every influx of new students into the class.

Calm, assertive, respectful teachers respond quickly to misbehavior so that it does not escalate into serious problems or chaos. They recognize that learning appropriate social skills and self-regulation skills is as important as any academic content standard, and embrace the chance to help kids who are still learning these skills.

Effective teachers spend at least six times more energy, words, and attention noticing what students do right, rather than always noticing what they do wrong. Only a solid self-regulating person can stay focused on noticing and celebrating the good in life.

Effective teachers get to know their students, including their learning interests and needs. It takes a strong and self-regulated teacher to stand up to the incredible pressure to race through content and keep up with pacing guides. The calm, assertive teacher knows that better outcomes are possible only when they ensure that the learning experience for each student includes a focus on that student’s interests, and at a level of challenge which allows student success.

Calm, assertive classroom teachers have learned not to get sucked into brain-draining arguments with students. When kids try to get it going, these teachers stay calm and strong on the inside, use empathy to try to recognize what might be causing this student’s need to argue, and then clearly describe what is allowed or expected in the classroom.

Effective teachers have learned to refrain from immediately responding to some situations, if the student is too emotionally upset to listen, or if they feel too upset to be effective in this moment. These teachers
recognize when they need to take a moment to regulate themselves, letting the student know that the situation will be considered as soon as they are both calm, and both using soft voices.

Effective classroom managers take time, often quite a bit of time, to let students build empathetic connections with other students in the classroom. They recognize that class culture is powerful. By taking the time to build a positive class culture, they ensure that students will always feel safe and connected in this classroom.

Calm, assertive educators also reach out to families, working to build some trust and connection that supports the importance of learning, and perhaps also the trust and connection that might help if there is ever a problem.

Self-regulated educators are able to share control with students. Calm and strong on the inside, these teachers don’t need to constantly prove they are in charge. These teachers offer choices within limits, usually giving kids options which are completely acceptable to the teacher. (Would you like to take the test on Wednesday or Thursday?)

Effective classroom managers let students solve their own problems whenever it is safe and reasonable to do so. They teach kids to think, plan, and problem-solve. Even though these are skills which will not be tested on the big standardized tests, calm assertive teachers take the time to help kids grow in ways that are important for life.

It’s a choice, you see. The self-regulated teacher chooses to get the rest, exercise, nutrition, social support, and everything else needed so that she can be fully present when greeting kids each day as they come in the door. The calm, assertive, respectful teacher chooses to take all the time needed to build classroom culture and routines, calmly knowing that only in that culture can great learning occur. The effective teacher chooses to give the effort and discipline to noticing what is special about each student, and to ensure that even the most challenging kids hear far more positives than negatives in her classroom.

Self-regulated educators know that every “behavior management” technique works better when you are in the calm, assertive, respectful state of mind. Kids can feel it in your presence. They are safer in your class. This is a place where there is no need to be afraid.

In recent decades, state and federal mandates have added incredible pressure on our schools. Staffs are expected to cover long lists of content standards, keep up with impossible pacing guides, prepare for high stakes tests, and give up weeks of instructional time for district assessments and state standardized
assessments. School rating systems (dubious at best), and teacher rating systems (even more dubious) threaten sanctions but offer little support. Many teachers and principals describe their schools as high-stress environments in which educators feel overloaded and under-supported. The importance of building classroom and school culture has often been forgotten in the race to cover and test.

In this atmosphere it is more difficult, and even more important, to be a self-regulated educator. The challenges of modern schools and the learning and behavior challenges of modern students, in combination with the demands of a busy life, make it more important than ever for an effective educator to be calm and assertive, strong on the inside, respectful and empathetic toward self and others. The self-regulated educator finds a way to leave the worries of daily life and the frustrations of bungling bureaucracies at the door each day as she sets up her classroom. In my heart, and in this classroom, there will be peace, and strength, and purpose, she quietly pledges.

The secret to a well-managed classroom is not about the techniques you use on the kids. It’s about how you manage yourself, and the choices you make to be in the state of mind to be a highly effective educator. The self-regulated teacher has made a choice to develop her capacity to be a calm, assertive, and respectful person as an essential ingredient to becoming a highly effective educator.

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