

Classroom Management Tips

By Erin Cole

Do you ever feel like teaching middle school is more like herding cats? I have been there. The beginning of my teaching career I had 600 students in my program 6th-8th grade. 280 or so of them were beginners. Talk about herding cats. I was straight out of college, in a very small/crammed band room and in desperate need of a classroom management system.

Find a System that Works for You and Your Program

Out of necessity as well, as the safety of my students, came a classroom management system that worked very well for me. There was a lot of trial and error and I got advice from mentors and colleagues, but eventually, I figured out a system that worked for us. The key is... developing a classroom management system that works for your program. The tips below worked for my program, but you may need to choose the ones that work for you and adapt them for your situation.

Create a routine for your students

Once you establish your classroom management system is going to look like, then the key is practicing it and sticking to it. Soon it will become routine for your students, and then all you have to do is teach. I really have found that it is that simple. In over 20 years of teaching middle school, I can count on one hand how many times I had to write up a student, refer them to an administrator, or assign a detention.

Build a Positive Learning Environment

Your students will buy into the system once they understand why it is needed, experience the results, and take pride in the program and their performances. It may take practice and explanation to help them understand the need for it, but it will happen...I promise.

Consistency is key

There is no one way to organize and run a classroom, but it is important to make decisions in a few key areas. Below are some of those areas and some suggestions to get you started.

Entering The Room

- Have the room set up, neat, and in order before the students walk in
- Greet students at the door of your classroom
- Be very clear and CONSISTENT about how to enter the room and your rules of the classroom.
 - Students should enter the room calmly. Decide if you want your students to come in silently or at a lowered voice level
 - The director should be in the room, supervising students. This could be at the front of the room, at the door to the classroom, or anywhere in the room that supervision is needed.
 - Give the students very clear instructions on getting their instruments and having a seat.

Start of Class

- Be very specific about how and when to unpack
 - Beginning band procedure for unpacking
 - Students will need detailed information on when to unpack the instrument. I have students unpack school-owned (large instruments) immediately upon entering the classroom. Everyone else gets their instruments out of the locker or storage room and has a seat, but they do not unpack yet. The rest of the students do not unpack until after the announcements. *(the unpacking routine is developed for large bands, small groups could modify the approach as long as the routine is set and students are quiet.)
 - After the announcements are given, students are given very clear instructions that they are to unpack without talking and get the band book and music in order. During this time, I am monitoring the students as they assemble the instruments. As we all know, beginners need a lot of supervision and reminders about how to properly assemble the instruments.
 - They are not to make a single sound on the instrument or mouthpiece at all during this time.
 - Students are then instructed to tizzle (air play) along with the recording once their instruments are unpacked. The recording is the background tracks for the band method book. I play the lines that we will be rehearsing in class that day. Tizzling with the recording is meant for the students to have something to keep them occupied while everyone is unpacking. It is also a tool to get the students focused for the day's rehearsal. It should NOT be used as a substitute for teaching the songs in the book or a replacement for warming up.
 - Once I see the students are all unpacked, I stop the recording and step on the podium.
 - Older students unpacking procedure
 - Tizzling is VERY beneficial when the students are coming in the room and getting ready for the class to start. The older students are allowed to unpack the instrument as soon as they get to their seat. The students are then to tizzle (air play) along with a recording each day when they come in the room. I have a recording of a piece the students will be rehearsing that day in class. As soon as the students unpack, they are to immediately tizzle with the recording that is playing. This gets the students mentally focused before class even starts.
 - Some days the recording playing or video shown on the screen will be of something we are learning about in class rather than a piece they are currently working on. I do like to change it up every now and then. It could be a video of a professional musician, or of a really great band or orchestra, etc...

During Rehearsal

- Have the rehearsal plan for the day on the board
 - I include a time on the board above the rehearsal plan for the day as to what time they should be ready for me to step on the podium and start the day's rehearsal
 - It is also a good idea with beginners to put a few reminders, such as, "Enter the Room Quietly" or "Do Not Unpack Yet". Until the routine is set, written reminders will help the students.
 - The rehearsal plan will include the daily warm-ups as well as what sections of a piece(s) of music I will be rehearsing that day
- Utilize staff as much as possible
 - If you have an assistant or other instructors, make sure you are all on the same page with the desired classroom management plan. Your students will rehearse better if the expectations and procedures are the same with every teacher on your team.

- If more than one teacher is in the room at the same time, utilize each person for supervision purposes entering and exiting the room.
- Pacing the rehearsal correctly is also very important. The director's pacing of the rehearsal is very important to the student's motivation. It is the director's responsibility to pace the rehearsal appropriately so that the objectives are met educationally, and at the same time the students are actively involved.
 - When rehearsing sections, be careful not to neglect other students for long periods of time (ex. percussion). This only encourages misbehavior.
 - Tizzling or air playing can be beneficial to the students as well as the director. Tizzling allows the students to actively do the fingers and put air through the instrument in rhythm. This will allow the students to go through the musical passage without playing out loud and it will allow for the director to hear what the students are tizzling and make any corrections before the students play out loud. This can also be used when you are listening to one section play something out loud, while the rest of the ensemble tizzles. Again, keeping students engaged.
 - Students should only play on the instrument when instructed by the director. I do not allow and playing out of turn on the instrument
 - Be "in tune" with your ensemble each day. Some days your students may be able to fine tune a section of a piece for 20 minutes, the next day it could be 2 minutes. Know what the attention span is on that day and roll with it!
 - Some days there could be a fire drill, or a duck and cover drill, etc.. In that case you just have to roll with it and get done what you can and that may mean keeping them playing and working differently to keep them engaged.

Rehearsal Procedures

- Instill correct rehearsal procedure with a consistent approach each day
 - Establish your rehearsal etiquette rules and stick to them. Ex. Not speaking during rehearsals, not playing after the cut-off, raising hand for questions, restroom pass procedures, etc...
 - Have a system in place for everything and communicate to your students clearly what those rules and expectations are.
 - Have a plan for the student that does not follow the classroom procedures. Communicate to your students and parents what those consequences are and follow through. Students as well as parents pick up on empty threats.
 - Praise the students often for exhibiting correct rehearsal procedure and proper behavior. Positive reinforcement motivates the students
 - Rehearsals should be disciplined, but students can still have fun!

Keys to Success

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CONSISTENCY ● Clear Instructions ● Reminders about rehearsal procedure ● Pacing and keeping students engaged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Positive reinforcement ● Balance between routine and variety ● High expectations ● Commitment from the director and students |
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Like most things worthwhile, this will take time and constant focus. With some key adjustments, you will likely see some immediate benefits, but will not have the "perfect" classroom. Take note of the successes and keep working towards that goal for your benefit as well as the benefit of the students.