62 SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE

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The career of many a potentially fine teacher has floundered upon the shoal of pupil discipline. While good disciplinarians are not necessarily excellent teachers, excellent teachers *are* necessarily good disciplinarians in the enlightened sense of the word.

Not only is good discipline imperative for the establishment and development of the successful teacher's career, but it is also imperative to the success of the school. Education cannot proceed without good discipline. Youngsters encouraged to law-lessness by one weak teacher make the work of their other teachers just that much more difficult.

Good discipline requires more than a "bag of tricks." It requires a basic philosophy from which specific techniques emerge. Good discipline is best

thought of as being positive — not negative. It is helping a pupil adjust to the requirements of his environment rather than punishment for his not having adjusted. It is turning *un*acceptable conduct into *acceptable* conduct.

Good discipline may be described as a friendly yet businesslike rapport in which pupils and teachers work cooperatively toward mutually recognized and mutually accepted goals. Distractions, frictions and disturbances which would interfere with the optimum functioning of the pupil, the class and the school are held to a minimum.

The ultimate, unique achievement of good discipline is *self*-discipline on the part of the pupils. Experience tells us that not all groups or all individuals are likely to become completely self-disciplined within the school years, yet that is the goal toward which we must strive. Any philosophy of discipline which does not teach and instill the ideal of *self-discipline* within the group and the individual will eventually prove weak and ineffective.

BE ORDERLY

- 1. The first requisite of discipline is ORDER. An orderly, well-run classroom sets the stage for orderly conduct.
- 2. Maintain the correct physical environment. Provide your class with the proper temperature and ventilation. Noise and other distractions should be kept to a minimum.



3. Have a place for everything. Insist that all classroom objects, such as dictionaries, posters, wall maps, easels, reference books, supplies — all be kept in their proper places.

4. Maintain a neat classroom. Students should be impressed with the importance of a neat, clean classroom and should be given the responsibility of helping you keep it that way.

5. Establish set procedures. Have a routine in all classroom activities — sharpening pencils, asking questions, obtaining papers, collecting assignments, etc. Having set policies will save your time and also prevent arguments among students.

6. Use seating arrangements as a specific tool to achieve good discipline. When pupils enter your classroom the *first day* of school, let them take whichever seats they wish. Since potential troublemakers often take rear seats, and since a few front seats are usually left vacant if there are more seats in the room than there are pupils, you can then casually fill the vacant front seats with reluctant backseaters. The pupils themselves have thus unwittingly helped you to head off trouble before your class has really begun!

7. Leave the front desk in the middle row unassigned. This can then be used during the year as a "hot seat" for the immediate alleviation of discipline problems. (It can also serve as a collection and distribution center and as a convenient and strategic place to rest your own weary bones!)



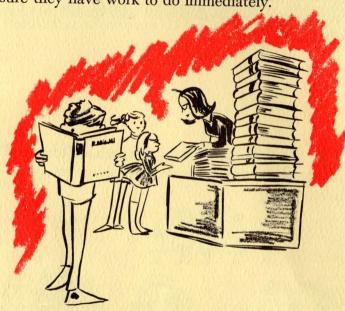
8. After two warnings, break up "talky" combinations and groups of pupils who are inattentive and/ or bent on sabotaging the class's progress. Reseat apart from one another.

SET BEHAVIOR STANDARDS

- 9. Set behavior standards immediately. Start the year with definite, imposed controls, which can be relaxed gradually as the class exhibits the necessary responsibility. It is always easier to slacken control than it is to "tighten up" after control has been lost. It is sometimes good practice, especially in the junior high, for classes to draw up their own codes of conduct (with the teacher as "adviser," if necessary) early in the school year.
- 10. Whatever your individual room standards may be, make sure they are reasonable, kept to a minimum, well understood by the class, and fairly and consistently enforced.
- 11. Insist on the general rule of only one voice at a time in your classroom (except in special cases, as when the class is divided into working committees). Even in a democracy, if progress rather than chaos is to reign, pupils must learn to be recognized before they speak.

KEEP THEM BUSY AND MOTIVATED

12. Get down to business with the bell. Make sure they have work to do immediately.



13. Prepare your plans beforehand. Plan so that all students will have enough work for the whole period. However, since no plan is perfect, have alternate plans and materials to fill unexpected gaps. Planning is your best assurance of preventing indecision.

14. Be definite. Classes are usually quick to sense the indecision of the teacher who does not know what to do next — or what to have the class do — or who does the same things for too long. Lack of preparation is an open invitation for widespread problem behavior.

15. Set class goals. Giving the class an "idealized" picture of themselves encourages good group conduct.

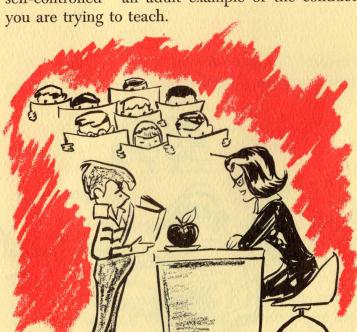
16. Sell your subject matter. Relate assignments to needs. Teach pupils the things that are meaningful to them. Stress the relationships of what you teach to the pupils' own welfare. No matter how well you have organized your contents, materials, and procedures, if they are not geared to the maturity and interests of a particular class, they invite problem behavior.

17. Motivate your classes and individual pupils by every technique at your command, and keep them motivated. Well-motivated classes and pupils are far less likely to present discipline problems. Prevention of problems is far better than cure.



BE AN ADULT

18. Much of the good morale and good discipline of the best classrooms is to be found in the inexplicable chemistry of personalities as they interact day by day — between you as a teacher and the students. For your part, you must be mature, self-controlled — an adult example of the conduct you are trying to teach.



19. Be yourself. There is no ideal personality for all teachers to emulate; you have to be your own best self. Children appreciate the genuine article—they are quick to detect anything synthetic or false in a teacher's attitude or personality.

20. Act your age. Children need a teacher — not a playmate. Be friendly always; but there is a basic difference between friendliness and familiarity, for "familiarity breeds contempt," especially for younger teachers. You can think as a pupil and understand pupils without becoming one of them. In your classroom you are always the friendly teacher doing a professional job.

21. Insist at all times on respect for grown-ups, for authority in general. Never accept any manner of address except Mr., Mrs., Miss and your last name or permit other teachers to be referred to except in this manner.

KEEP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

22. Be positive. Negative (punitive) discipline should never be your basic approach. Giving praise, providing opportunities for daily successes, giving encouragement and inspiration — these are positive ways to solve discipline problems.

23. Be kind but firm. Children are still children. They need kindness, but they also need a firm guiding hand. A good teacher will strike a balance between encouraging them to make their own decisions and making decisions for them. A weak, vacillating teacher loses the respect of his students.

24. Be consistent. Nothing is more confusing to a student than a teacher whose standards and values are constantly shifting and changing. Teachers, being human, are subject to moods like everyone else. But moodiness or no, basic values and behavior standards should remain constant.

25. Be fair. Since the children in a class will be different, your treatment of each will be different. A slow child, for example, may need a great deal more praise and encouragement than a bright one. Such "special handling," however, is not the same as showing obvious favoritism—having "pets" or favorites. Children will accept the one but resent the other.



CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS

26. Don't be thin-skinned. Don't take undisciplined, aggressive student behavior personally. You are simply the symbol of authority against which the children are fighting.



27. Do your utmost not to dislike a child because of his actions. Reject the behavior of the child, never the child himself.

28. Don't argue. Nothing is more demeaning to a teacher than getting involved in arguments with students. You do, after all, represent the school and its policies, its rules. There is no argument about the rightness nor wrongness of these things; they exist and it is your responsibility to see that they are enforced. You may discuss and explain, but you should never argue.

29. No one is perfect; we're all human. Be big enough, adult enough, to admit your errors.

30. However timid, unsure and ineffectual you may sometimes feel inside, try to project confidence, even if it requires acting the part until it becomes natural.

31. Don't be afraid to show your sense of humor. Some classroom incidents are funny, and you can't avoid them. Laugh with the class and/or at yourself freely and naturally.

GROUP DISCIPLINE

32. Don't make an issue of everything. Sometimes it is best not to see every little misdemeanor that goes on in your class. The important thing is to spot REAL trouble and to nip that in the bud before it becomes a major issue. Use discernment.

33. Don't threaten. Of all the ways to achieve desired behavior, threatening is probably the weakest. However, if you do predict a certain punishment for a certain situation, be sure that it can be, and is, carried out. For example, don't threaten expulsion from school, since only the principal has authority for such action. Idle threats become meaningless and impair, rather than increase, your effectiveness.

34. Don't make deals and don't compromise your standards to win popularity. If you do resort to deals, the implication is that the class is running you — and it will be.

35. Understand pupils' fads and don't belittle them. An individual teacher is not going to change the adolescents' world. Let the administration pronounce which fads are unacceptable; then, once school policy has been established, enforce it faithfully and consistently.



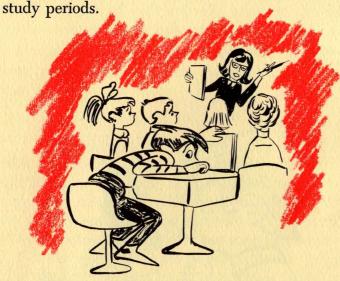
- **36.** Reject undesirable pupil behavior but never the entire group. The distinction is crucial. If a group thinks you don't like them as people, you're in for trouble. Pupils are entitled to the encouragement that can be gained from knowing that you still have confidence in *them*.
- 37. If unacceptable behavior is widespread in your group, concentrate on the ringleader. If you can win him over, others will follow.
- 38. Don't punish the whole group because of the misbehavior of one or a few individuals. This is unfair to the innocent, and it is unrealistic if you hope that the group will further punish the guilty ones. Such action on your part only arouses the justified resentment of those whose support you need.

For example, if you are unavoidably late in getting to class and the room is in chaos when you arrive, ask all pupils to stand who were NOT contributing to the confusion. Only the ones who remain seated are the ones to be punished, by their own admission. If a misbehaver claims immunity by standing, he punishes himself by dishonestly deserting his fellow miscreants: thus, peer pressure encourages honesty in such a situation.

39. Action is more effective than words. For example, when pupils try to catch up on their reading or homework for other classes during your class period, simply take the "foreign" material without comment. The pupil must then come to you after class to get back his book or assignment. This can be more effective than having him listen to a "lecture" from you while he is surrounded by sympathetic peers.



40. Never give additional homework as punishment. Discipline problems often arise among the slower learners and/or the "unmotivated," and such "piling it on" only compounds the problem. If laggards are your problem, it is better to enforce the meeting of minimum requirements by after-school study periods



41. Try silence as a means of checking a misbehaver in an otherwise well-disciplined group. Stop dramatically in the middle of a sentence and wait for him and the group to sense the reason for your pause. Then go on without comment. This alone is sometimes sufficient.

DISCIPLINING THE INDIVIDUAL

- 42. Recognize unacceptable behavior for what it is a symptom. The need for attention, affection, expression of fear, resentment, insecurity these may be the basic problem. By fulfilling these needs you can show a student that he does not have to resort to unacceptable behavior to gain his ends.
- 43. Try to get at the root cause of antisocial behavior. Some of our best guidance is done by classroom teachers whose empathy and sympathetic concern encourages pupils to talk with them and unburden their troubles. The teacher may be able to identify himself with the pupil from personal experience, or at least help the pupil to analyze his own case objectively. Hand-in-hand fulfillment of an improved pupil "image" could be the turning point in a student's life. There have been cases where a teacher was the only real friend a pupil had, and such pupils have been known to be eternally grateful.
- 44. Be patient. It takes time to work out deepseated discipline problems.

45. Don't put off contacting the parents. If a conference with them seems necessary, arrange it as soon as possible. Don't let a discipline problem drag out. Determine what needs to be done, then act.

46. Identify yourself with the class as a whole when dealing with a specific individual. An offender will then be hurting his fellow pupils, not you, as you defend the group's best interests. Don't let a discipline case become a head-on collision involving a pupil and his peers against an isolated you.



CORRECTIVE MEASURES

47. Make the punishment fit the individual—not the crime. Since each pupil is different from every other pupil, not all pupils respond in the same way to the same technique. Be sure that your approach (and punishment, if necessary) fits the offender. This requires sensitive insight. (Since you should also avoid favoritism, this can be a real dilemma. Use your best judgment.)

48. In general, refrain from using penalties which are personally and publicly humiliating to a pupil.

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49. Avoid punishing in the heat of anger. Suspend sentencing until both you and the pupil can view the case in perspective. His apprehension over the outcome can itself have a salutary effect. You might then ask the pupil what he would do if he were in your position. Be sure he understands the purpose and the justice of the punishment, if punishment is necessary.

50. Generally speaking, it is an important part of your job as a teacher to solve your own discipline problems before they need to be sent to the office. When you need advice for handling a group or an individual, consult a fellow teacher, your department head, or an adviser, and don't wait too long. Send troublemakers to the office only as a LAST resort. Even the office becomes ineffective if overused, and overuse of it is an admission to your entire class of your own ineffectualness.

On the other hand, there are occasions when promptly dispatching a chief troublemaker can have a most salutary effect upon a whole class, and it is a function of the office to back you in every way possible when there is a genuine need for real help.

51. It is sometimes effective to give a pupil additional responsibility for remedying among his fellow pupils the very offense for which he is remiss. For example, the boy who litters the floor is given the responsibility for keeping it clean, the straggler is delegated to keep other pupils in line, etc. Creation within the pupil of a proprietary interest in his class is sometimes achieved by getting him to accept any responsibility for the class as a whole.

COOPERATION WITH PARENTS

52. In extreme cases, a visit by the teacher to the home where a face-to-face conference is held with the parents, pupil, and teacher can be both revealing and helpful. The purpose is to achieve understanding, agreement, and improvement, not to win an argument. It is best to clear such teacher-initiated conferences with the school administration.

Such face-to-face conferences can be called at school, of course; but they are not always so revealing of home conditions which help in understanding the pupil. Employed parents often do not respond to such an invitation unless the case is serious enough for the misbehaver to have been suspended by the principal.

53. You may wish to communicate by letter or phone call with the parents of chronic misbehavers. Parents are sometimes more cooperative than you expect (and sometimes less so). It is advisable to discuss such communications with the proper authority before proceeding, not only because he should know of your action but because he may have helpful background information about the pupil for you.

54. If it seems advisable to enlist parental cooperation, it is sometimes effective to have the pupil write the letter to his parents informing them of his unsatisfactory citizenship and stating his intentions concerning his actions in the future. Request that the letter be returned to you with his parents' signatures.



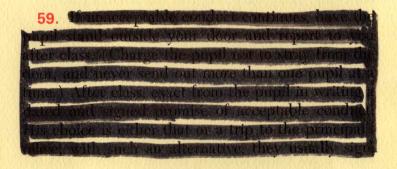
HANDLING ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT PUPILS

- 55. "Call" a pupil on unacceptable conduct if it is a significant breach. Don't delay unduly in the case of an individual's behavior which is constantly annoying to the group and to you, for that which is annoying today may result in havoc tomorrow.
- **56.** If such breaches recur, move the pupil during class to the "hot seat" (front seat of middle row, which is kept unassigned for just such emergencies) if necessary.

Speak to the offender privately after class to achieve his understanding of the situation and his intention of doing better. (When it is necessary to reprimand a pupil severely, it is usually best to do it in private. To do so in front of his classmates may elicit sympathy on his behalf and/or build his prestige among his peers.)

57. If breaches of good conduct continue, move pupil to an isolated seat in rear of room until he is ready to be "readmitted" to class. It may well be desirable upon his "readmission" to assign him to a new permanent seat in the front of the room under your more immediate supervision.

58. Get all the information that is available about the pupil. Make use of guidance and department files. Consult counselors, former teachers, and/or advisers. A "U" (unsatisfactory) in citizenship may well be justified by this time. You may also wish to contact the parents.





- 60. If unacceptable conduct still continues, you may well wish to have a face-to-face conference with the parents and the pupil.
- 61. Should unacceptable conduct persist, and you feel you have exhausted your own resources, it is now time for referral of the chronic offender to the proper administrative official with a written case history from you. Readmission to class should be probationary, and this should be clearly understood by the administration, the parents, the pupil, and the teacher.
- **62.** Further evidence of incorrigibility calls for a return of the pupil with further documentation to the administrative official who readmitted him to your class on probation.

Psychiatric analysis, a change of teachers, dropping the subject, and/or suspension from school by the principal is at last called for.

By this time you have surely done your full part.

May success attend your efforts!