

Even in the best classrooms in the best schools, with the best teachers and the best students, now and then things go wrong. In the last chapter, we looked at the power of expectations. Now we turn our attention to what one assistant principal jokingly refers to as “the dark side of the force.” What do the great teachers do when a student misbehaves? What principles guide their behavior in difficult situations? How do they respond when things go wrong?

When a Student Misbehaves

When a student misbehaves, the great teacher has one goal: to keep that behavior from happening again. The least effective teacher often has a different goal: revenge. Effective teachers are motivated to prevent misbehavior; ineffective teachers are motivated *after* a student misbehaves, to punish the student. If a child does not bring a pencil to class, they want that child to feel badly about it and choose to behave better as a result. They focus on the penalty, the punishment—the past.

Think about the parents we work with. Some parents consistently look to the future. They wonder what we can do differently so that their child will be more successful. Other parents consistently focus on the past. They talk about last year’s teacher, or an experience the child’s older sibling went through in another setting. Some parents even harp on what happened when they themselves were in school! Which parents would *you* rather work with?

As educators, we must focus on what we have the ability to influence. We all know we can’t change what has already happened; what’s the point of directing our energy there?

Let's work instead to prevent the misbehavior from happening again.

What Great Teachers Do Differently

Sending Students to the Office

Let's consider how teachers might want a student to be-
have after a disciplinary conference with the principal. Inef-
fective teachers want students to be upset when they leave the
office. Effective teachers want students to be better when they
leave. As a principal, I worked hard to help my teachers un-
derstand that we do not want students angry when they
leave. Heck, they were angry when they got there. As a matter
of fact, that may be why they were referred to the office in the
first place. Angry students are a problem, not a solution.
Of course, teachers are entitled to support from the princi-
pal in discipline matters. But effective teachers have a clear
understanding of what this support entails. I'd like to share a
story that illustrates this from the principal's point of view.

"Nuthin' Happened"

One of my guidelines as a principal was that if a student
cursed at a teacher, the consequence was a ten-day
out-of-school suspension. One week into the new school year,
line—and landed in my office.

When I found out what he had done, I told him he was
suspended for ten days. To my surprise, he burst into tears. He
was genuinely upset. Then when I called his parents, they
were really ticked off—at him. "Cussing at teachers... I don't
know where he gets that #@~& from!" ("Me either," I thought.
")

His parents lived far from town, he would have to ride the
bus home. Until then, he sat in my office and sobbed. Finally,
with the last bell of the day about to ring, I offered him a box of
tissues and helped him settle down. Then I escorted him to his
bus.

As it happened, several of his classmates—and the teacher
who had sent him to me—were standing there. I heard one of

his buddies ask, "What happened when you got sent to the office?" The culprit replied, "Nuthin'," and hopped on the bus.

That won me a glare from the teacher—but as we talked about it later, it also gave us both an important insight. Of course he said, "Nuthin' happened." What was he supposed to say? "They broke me like a horse. I've been bawling like a baby for an hour! I'll never do anything wrong again!"

Effective teachers understand that what matters is not whether a student leaves the office mad, and not what the student reports to his peers, but how the student behaves in the future. Effective teachers don't need the principal to wield the sword of revenge on their behalf. They *do* need the principal to reinforce their expectations for student behavior and to support their responses to misbehavior. In fact, they welcome all the help they can get!

A Teacher's Bag of Tricks

While the support of the administrator is always helpful, here are some questions that the excellent educator asks himself/herself.

- ◆ "What can teachers do when a student misbehaves?"

List all the options—not just what you would do, but what any teacher, good or bad, rookie or veteran, might do.

I've done this with many groups, and the lists look remarkably similar: eye contact, proximity, redirect the student, send them to the office, put them in timeout, argue with the student, send them to sit in the hall, yell, ignore, praise another student for positive behavior, embarrass them, and so on.

(Now, most of you probably flinch at some of these behaviors and nod in agreement with others. However, the point here is quantity. After we generate a list, we can shift to quality.)

Now answer this question:

- ◆ "Which of these approaches *always* work?"

The answer is clear: "None of them." Of course there is no one approach that always works. If there were, we would use it every time.

These options are a teacher's bag of tricks. Ask yourself this:

- ◆ "Does every teacher have the same options?"

The answer is yes. Every teacher has the same tools in their bag of tricks. Every teacher can use eye contact or proximity, send a student to the office, praise, argue, or yell. Not every teacher does, but any teacher *could* do everything on your list and any other lists teachers can generate.

What, then, is the difference between good classroom managers and poor classroom managers? It's not what is in our bag of tricks; they are all the same. What are the variables?

One variable, of course, is how often the teachers reach into their bag of tricks. A great teacher reaches in once or twice a day. A poor teacher grabs away several times an hour, and if we reach into our bag of tricks often enough, we're going to pull out some ugly ones.

This brings us to another, more important variable—the question of *quality*. Some options that often appear on the list—yelling, arguing, and humiliating (sarcasm)—deserve special attention. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ◆ "When is sarcasm appropriate in the classroom?"

You know the answer: *Never*. Then let's never use it in our classrooms.

- ◆ "Who decides how many arguments you get into in a week?"

The answer, of course, is that *we do*. We never win an argument with a student. As soon as it starts, we have lost. If their peers are watching, they cannot afford to give in. We would *like* to win the argument, but they *have* to win the argument. (Plus, I have always felt that in all student-teacher interactions, there needs to be at least one adult—and I would prefer that it be the teacher.)

- ◆ “Outside of a true emergency—*Watch out for the acid!*—when is an appropriate time and place for yelling?”

Again, we know the answer is *never*. The students we are most tempted to yell at have been yelled at so much, why on earth would we think this would be effective with them? Therefore, we do not yell at students.

Effective teachers choose wisely from their bag of tricks.

Respect Your Students, Their Parents—and Yourself

As educators, we know how important it is to treat students with respect, no matter how they behave. We do this for our students' sake; otherwise, they won't thrive in our classrooms. We also understand that we should extend the same respect to their parents—again, no matter how they behave; otherwise, we won't be able to work productively with them to help their child. However, there's another reason we should treat students and their parents with respect: We do it for our own sake. Think of how you feel when you know you have treated a student or parent inappropriately. Knowing that you have made them feel badly, you feel worse!

During a recent workshop on dealing with difficult parents, one teacher described a typical problem—a teacher who telephones a parent to discuss a child's misbehavior is blasted with a barrage of rudeness—and offered a simple solution: Just hang up the phone. The rest of the group sympathized with the situation; such harangues are enough to tax anyone's patience. But what happens if we choose a response like hanging up on a parent? The issue shifts from the child's behavior to our behavior. We have actually given that parent the upper hand. Especially during times of stress, it's essential to remain professional.

Twenty-Four Students on the Side of the Teacher

It is the first day of school, and we are invisible observers in Mr. Johnson's first period social studies class. Of the twenty-five students in the room, twenty-four seem to be on their best first-day-of-school behavior. But one—we'll call him #25—is not settling in quite as well. As a matter of fact, he is downright uncooperative and rude.

At this point, assuming no other dynamics are yet established, the other twenty-four students are on Mr. Johnson's side. They want him to take steps so #25 will stop misbehaving. However, since #25 is one of them, they have special expectations. They do want #25 to stop misbehaving, but they want Mr. Johnson to deal with him in a professional and respectful way. As long as he does, they will stay on his side.

However, the first time he treats #25 in a less than professional manner—regardless of #25's behavior—the other students will side with #25. Maybe not all of them will shift their allegiance right away, but some will, and now Mr. Johnson has several #25s on his hands. If this happens often, eventually the class will consist of twenty-five #25s—and not one student on Mr. Johnson's side.

In general, students know the difference between right and wrong, and they want their teachers to deal with irresponsible peers. If you *always* respond appropriately and professionally, everyone else will be on your team. But the first time you do not, you may lose some of your supportive students—and you may never get them back. This makes maintaining a high level of dignity, especially under pressure, a critical skill. Effective teachers have this skill; others do not.

Restoring Trust

Conflict between a teacher and a student, or between a teacher and a parent—especially if it is not resolved—often leads to a loss of trust. The student or parent loses trust in the teacher; perhaps the teacher loses trust as well.

In Chapter 6, we'll look at how the best teachers take responsibility for changing situations and behaviors that have

led to problems. In Chapter 9, we'll address the importance of repairing relationships that have been damaged by past missteps. Great teachers understand that any loss of trust is difficult to remedy. Even more crucially, they know that unless they work to prevent a repetition of the conflict, the fragile trust might never be restored. Our efforts to rebuild that trust are often more productive if we focus on the future more than on the past.