

Taming an Unruly Class

If your classroom has become unruly, can you ever get back to a positive learning environment that's fun for you AND your students? We think so if you're willing to reflect honestly and be consistent.

1. Examine own expectations for your classroom. Students can't be expected to follow your expectations until you are consciously aware of them. Students have a way of knowing when the teacher doesn't really have the boundaries set.
 - Do you have clear expectations in your own mind of the way you want students to behave? Do you really want them to be perfectly quiet all the time? Do the rules change sometimes? If so, when?
 - Have you communicated your expectations clearly to students?
 - Have you decided what strategies you'll use if/when students get unruly? What behaviors can you ignore? Which behaviors can be ignored? Can you use a catch phrase, the student's name, simply pointing to posted expectations, or physical proximity to reduce unruly behavior?
2. Explain your expectations. Have students line up along the wall outside the classroom. Talk to them very calmly about what went wrong the day before, and how you want things to be different today. Clearly explain your expectations, preferably no more than three or four. Ask if students have questions. Have students walk silently into the classroom. If they don't do it right the first time, have all of the students walk back outside, line up silently, and walk back into the classroom.
3. Once students are seated and have done what you asked them to do, in a calm voice recognize the specific things they that met your expectations for the classroom. Reiterate your expectations once more in a calm voice.
4. Of course, you need to get work done today, but the goal of this day is for students to behave in a way that allows everyone to learn. Keep the leash short. Stop undesirable behavior as soon as it begins. No leeway today.
5. Catch students doing something right and reward the behavior. Give them some kind of recognition you know they will enjoy, maybe verbal recognition, a special privilege, or a treat (if your district allows that). It doesn't have to be big, but students need to know that they've done it right. You may have to reward the behavior a little at a time, catching particular groups of students behaving the way you want them to.
6. As students leave the classroom, thank them specifically for the new behavior today. This sets the stage for success tomorrow.
7. Reflect on what worked and what didn't so you are ready for tomorrow.
8. The next day, before students walk in the door, have them line up outside the classroom. Remind them of your expectations and the good work that they did on the previous day. Then expect good things, be consistent about your expectations, and celebrate the new habits your students are developing.

Questions to Ponder When Taming an Unruly Class

- What are my 3 or 4 most important expectations?
- How can I most clearly explain my expectations to my students?
- How can I reinforce and recognize behavior that meets my expectations?
- What strategies will I use when behavior doesn't meet my expectations?
- What is a meaningful way to thank students for new behavior as they leave the classroom?