

# PART I

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## Proactive Teaching and Empowering Students

*It's far more important to be the right kind  
of teacher than it is to be the right kind of student.*

—Denti

**C**onsider this guiding statement or thought as you progress through the book. Oftentimes when there are management challenges in your classroom, it is easy to blame the student, his or her family, or the community where the student comes from, rather than analyze what you as a teacher might be doing to contribute to some of the issues. Don't get me wrong, some children, for whatever the reason, can be difficult and get on your proverbial nerves. However, you should remember that those students comprise only a small number compared to the students who love school and enjoy being in your class. I know that often a teacher's grey hairs can be caused by the behavior problems of a few. Interestingly, most teachers comment on the few students who cause problems rather than commenting on the students who comply and progress through the curriculum taking advantage of good instruction and timely encouragement. In workshops I conduct, I use the example of a dream about a giant multi-ton barge, shrouded in darkness and fog, coming to you the classroom teacher. The barge captain, positioned stoically on the bow, yells out through a megaphone, "What kids would you like to get rid of so you can have

a great year?” You can’t believe it and are so thankful that the captain has come your way. You immediately respond, “How about these 10 students?” The barge captain obliges and the next morning you walk into class and all of the 10 students who exhibited minor to major behavior problems (some just wouldn’t put their name on the right hand corner of the page even though you reminded them time and time again) are *gone!* The next week goes by and then you have the same reoccurring dream and the barge captain once again asks, “Want to get rid of a few more students?” Your reply is a resounding “Yes!” So you get rid of about 5 more students. The barge captain keeps showing up in your dream until you are down to 1 student and you yell out, “Now I can finally teach!” You are so relieved. You can now work one on one, watching the student progress in front of your very eyes, instead of hoping that you get through to most of your students or that they will behave and learn what is expected from a particular grade-level curriculum.

I know that you may find this exaggerated example funny, but in humor there is always a grain of truth. The truth is that there are days that all of us would like to be able to ship kids out that don’t want to learn or cause headaches. Maybe you’d like to order up that imaginary barge to come take your troublemakers away to another classroom, another school, or another state. Unfortunately, the kids with problems just keep coming and that’s the reason for this book. There are no barges to take kids away. You can identify children for special education or have them attend a specialized class for math or English, but invariably you, the general education teacher, are responsible for the bulk of their education. And this is no easy task. Both this chapter and this book offer no panaceas. They do offer ways to improve your teaching and classroom management skills, enhance your knowledge base, and help you maintain a positive attitude so you can be proactive.

Proactive teaching simply means that a teacher anticipates what will happen and when, rather than waiting for something to occur and then reacting, oftentimes inappropriately. It requires tremendous preparation and vigilance to head problems off before they escalate into full-blown meltdowns, confrontations, or withdrawals. Proactive teachers do not give up or give in. Instead of imagining a barge captain coming to take kids away, they see themselves as responsible for creating a positive, learning environment for all students. The chapters in Part I define proactive teaching and student empowerment in more depth, focusing on ways that teachers can take and maintain control in their classrooms.

# Empowering Students Through Proactive Teaching

**S**everal years ago, I heard about a teacher who lined her students up in order from beginning to end in a very inequitable manner. The beginning of the line had students who could pay for their lunch, second in line were students who could partially pay, and the back or end of the line were students who received free lunch. The students at the end of the line would slink to the back of the line with their eyes peeled to the floor, while the students who could pay for their lunch would strut confidently to the front of the line. The students in the middle wanted to be associated with the students at the front of the line and disregarded the students at the back of the line. The teacher had set up a situation where students at the back of the line were disempowered and felt like second-class citizens. The students in the front of the line felt a sense of entitlement; the students in the middle aligned themselves with what could be perceived as the high-status position; while the students in the back felt inferior or unequal. This teacher had knowingly set up a situation wherein students were treated with disrespect and disdain. One can only surmise the effect on these students during their tenure in the class and in later years to come. Make no mistake, teachers have tremendous power and authority to create an environment where students feel cared for, needed, and empowered. They can also do the opposite as is evident in this example. I trust that when reading this story you were as bothered as I was at this teacher's actions and behavior toward her students. So let's turn our attention to the ways teachers can be proactive and empower students to be their best.

Being proactive entails a conscientious effort on the part of teachers to provide a classroom environment that allows students to be themselves, take risks, learn from mistakes, and understand how to take responsibility for their actions and feelings. A proactive teacher acts in advance to deal with expected difficulty. He or she controls the expected occurrence causing something to happen rather than reacting after something has happened. A proactive teacher maintains high standards, sets limits, applies consequences responsibly and most importantly creates a learning environment that is fun and encouraging. You never hear students talk about how much science or math they learned in a class. They do always talk about a teacher they liked or disliked. And without a doubt, the teacher who creates a caring and trusting atmosphere with clearly defined limits always garners praise from students. When teachers react inconsistently to student behavioral challenges or lay in wait to catch a student for misbehaving, students begin to mistrust their teacher. Then either the child avoids the teacher or does something negative to get the teacher's attention. For every negative action by the teacher there is an equal and opposite negative action by the student—*good ole Newton's Law*. Likewise, for every positive action students respond accordingly. A proactive teacher values students, anticipates problems, and sets up a learning environment that captivates student interest and attention. The teacher creates the context for student empowerment.

Empowerment can best be defined as providing a child or student with a sense of confidence, capability, competence, and self-esteem to meet life's challenges. Although the word empowerment has been overused and sometimes misused, it stills holds tremendous value and allows individuals to feel that they are important and can make a difference in the world. In education, *empowering* is a process that takes time and commitment on a teacher's part to ensure that children and youth develop a positive self-image, have decision-making power, and most importantly, have a range of options from which to make healthy, informed choices. Adults act as important role models empowering children and youth with the necessary social and learning tools to deal with life's many ups and downs. They proactively "model the way," laying the foundation for lifelong learning. The best teachers gently nudge children along the path to success. They often empower a child to do more than they ever believed possible. However for students to reach their potential, teachers must apply limits and consequences in order to teach positive behavior. These life lessons help children to become self-reliant and capable adults. A classroom wherein the teacher encourages positive student and classroom behavior provides the opportunity for beneficial learning inside and outside the classroom.

## **RECOGNITION AND ENCOURAGEMENT**

Student empowerment starts with recognition and encouragement from proactive educators. When teachers recognize student achievement and effort in a clear, consistent manner, students feel more capable and competent and are, in turn, more willing to learn. When teachers encourage students to be their best,

they will live up to the teacher's expectations, time and time again. Personalizing recognition by giving students either a tangible award (a sticker, a tally mark, a homework pass) or a non-tangible award (verbal compliment, a high five) increases a student's perseverance to task and increases their self esteem. In their book *Classroom Instruction That Works*, Marzano, Pickering and Pollack identify a number of essential strategies backed by research that impact academic performance. One of the vital strategies happens to be reinforcing effort and providing recognition. It could be implied that a teacher's statements of "good job," or "way to go," or "good boy, good girl" indicate the teacher's satisfaction with a student or child's task performance. Although one could walk into any class in the country and hear teachers delivering countless similar statements, Marzano and his coauthors' research does not endorse such an approach. Their research reinforces the view that recognition should be tied to a standard of achievement, a standard that the student values (good grades), or that the teacher values (completes assignments on time). *A good girl or good boy* helps to make a child feel worthy; however, it does not specifically give him or her feedback on what is done well. *Recognition* must be clearly defined, directed, and measurable so that the student understands exactly what he or she is doing well. Designing weekly goals with students where they log in their efforts and achievements and then reflect on them with a peer or the teacher can be most empowering. Many of the activities found in Part I of this book provide a foundation for recognizing and honoring students for their achievements and for taking responsibility for their actions.

On the other hand, *encouragement* can be a bit tricky. Unlike recognition, it does not have to be tied to a specific achievement standard or award, but must be ongoing, supportive, clear, and definitely make the student feel empowered and capable. The adage "one to grow on and ten to glow on" appears to be more important nowadays than ever before. Students need corrective feedback (one to grow on) given in a kind and supportive manner and they need an "obnoxious" amount of encouragement (ten to glow on) to continue to learn from the task at hand. When teachers encourage students to be their best, they send a clear and convincing message that they care deeply for them and kids feel and know when encouragement is genuine. Phrases such as "I really like the way you solved that problem, keep up the good work," or "Can you tell me how you both figured that out? The two of you are quite brilliant, don't you both agree?" send such a powerful and empowering message to students that the shine bouncing off of their smiles can light up the classroom. Purposeful and continuous encouragement is the mark of a proactive teacher and, in turn, the mark of secure agile students. The following vignettes point out the stark differences between a teacher who builds an encouraging environment that students trust versus a teacher who betrays the trust in students thus creating a dispiriting climate.

Mrs. Yenez always has something nice to say about her sixth-grade students. She posts statements throughout her room such as, *You are EXTRAordinary*, *You are IMPORTANT*, and *You are SOMEBODY*. Not only does Mrs. Yenez dot her room with encouraging words, she backs it up with very specific comments

related to students on task behavior. For instance, when Joshua completed his assignment before others, she was quick to acknowledge him. She then had him help another student who found the activity difficult. Students in Mrs. Yenez's classroom feel safe, welcomed, and acknowledged for not only being a good student but for being a good person as well.

In contrast, Ms. Jerrico praises her fourth-grade students continuously with "good boy" and "good girl" statements; however, they are not directly associated with an activity. As a result, in many ways she sounds like a broken record. Students ignore the salutation because she sometimes uses sarcasm indiscriminately and can be harsh with her punishments. Just yesterday, she said, "Good girl Tara" and then lambasted her for having a messy desk with this acerbic comment, "hope your room and house aren't as messy as your desk." The atmosphere in Ms. Jerrico's classroom is one of uncertainty for her students combined with a foreboding sense of underhanded retribution. Students comply with Ms. Jerrico's mercurial demands, yet make snide remarks about her mood swings.

Recognizing and encouraging students, though easy to understand, continues to be difficult for most teachers to do on a consistent basis. Some of the following concepts offer ways to make recognizing and encouraging students a bit easier for teachers.

## **ESTABLISHING CLEAR GROUND RULES**

In Harry and Rosemary Wong's recent book, *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher*, they articulate the importance of procedures, clear and realistic expectations, and response strategies when students are out of compliance. On the very first day and the first minute that students enter the classroom, teachers set the tone for either a well-managed or poorly-managed class. Children and adolescents know whether the teacher is in control or not by the way they interact in those first few minutes and hours and in the subsequent weeks ahead. Students are looking for a clear and identified structure with established ground rules for behavior, from requesting to use the bathroom, to lining up, to interacting in small groups, or to using a physical response (like thumbs up) for a request or an answer. Sadly, establishing ground rules though an essential component for a well-run classroom can be difficult to create and reinforce. Teachers tend to employ ground rules when things have gone awry. According to the Wongs, procedures or ground rules distinguish the effective teacher from the noneffective teacher and must be elevated to a high priority and continuously reinforced. Teachers who take the time to develop a set of ground rules, or ways of doing things in the classroom spend less time managing misbehavior and more time teaching. Ground rules can be established in tandem with students, but prior to doing so, it behooves a teacher to have a few well-established ground rules written and thoroughly explained before students weigh in on what they think might be appropriate ground rules. A ground rule that you think might be of utmost importance may not even enter



the consciousness of your students. Ground rules that you write down and post above your white board read something like this:

### **Classroom Ground Rules**

- Be ready to learn with your materials on your desk when the bell rings.
- When I am talking, sit up tall and track me with your eyes as I move from place to place.
- Use an *inside* voice—soft, but loud enough to be heard.
- Raise your hand and ask questions only if it is related to what we are studying, for example, “What page are we supposed to be on?” or “I don’t understand how to do problem x.” Otherwise, *No Hand Raising!*
- Put your hand on your shoulder and tap it lightly if you have a personal request, such as needing to use the bathroom.
- No putdowns (making fun of a student, hurting anyone with mean words) will be tolerated.
- Bullying another student in class will not be tolerated and if it occurs, the bully and the victim will meet with the teacher to discuss appropriate consequences.
- Students who see bullying in the class, on the playground, or anywhere else on campus must notify the teacher or another staff member immediately.

A teacher can suggest that students write ground rules that they think are important for the teacher to abide by and for the class in general to follow. This can be a fun activity but must be closely monitored. Have students think of a few ground rules that help them grow and learn. Ground rules that students might think important for the teacher to follow could read something like this:

### **Student Ground Rules**

- When I talk to my teacher he or she will really listen to me.
- My teacher will not make me feel stupid or embarrass me.
- Our teacher will frequently acknowledge our effort and good work.

Ground rules act as agreements between you and your students and your students and you. You can reinforce a ground rule by simply restating the ground rule and requesting compliance. This form of communication shows students that you value the classroom ground rules, that you will reinforce them, and that you believe students can live up to the established expectations. Ineffective statements such as, “How many times do I have to tell you,” or “Do I always have to remind you,” are now replaced with pointing to the posted ground rule or signaling students to follow the specific rule. Especially in the first week of school, teachers who take the time to establish and then model the principal rules reduce behavior problems. Well established ground rules help teachers avoid inappropriate and oftentimes immature responses toward students.

In order to ensure that the ground rules will be adhered to by you and your students, follow these very simple yet important guidelines. You will find that a little up-front training on ground rules saves you precious instructional time throughout the year.

1. Develop a few specific ground rules that are clearly defined.
2. Verbally review the ground rules with the students as a whole class.
3. In front of the class, model the ground rules with students by using examples and nonexamples. For instance, for the ground rule *when I am talking, sit up tall and track me with your eyes as I move from place to place*, the teacher can model it the following way. “OK students look at me, now slouch in your chairs (teacher models slouching), now sit up. Do it one more time—slouch and sit up.” This is fun for students. “When I indicate track me with your eyes, I am going to go over to the side of the room and I want you to continue to track me. Now I am going over to the other side of the room and I want you to still be tracking me. Good, now when I talk please track me and listen at the same time. Remember to sit up in your chair and listen closely to what I say.” The nonexample is slouching, talking to another student, and looking at the ceiling. Model the nonexample, then model the correct way. Reinforce the ground rule by repeating the rule at least two more times. “The ground rule is *when I am talking, sit up tall and track me with your eyes as I move from place to place*. Once again the ground rule is *when I am talking, sit up tall and track me with your eyes as I move from place to place*.”
4. Reinforce the ground rules continually with positive statements such as, “I like the way you are following the teacher-talking ground rule. It makes my job a lot easier.”
5. Periodically, role-play the ground rules with real examples and nonexamples from your class.
6. Tweak, change, add, or rewrite your ground rules as needed.

For your teacher ground rules, revisit them periodically with the students. Ask the students for feedback on how they think you are doing. For student ground rules, poll the class as a whole or ask the students to jot you a note on your progress. You might be surprised at their honesty.

## TEACHER COMMITMENT STATEMENTS

I was in a middle school class recently and noticed that the teacher, Mrs. J., had posted a few statements that she would commit to throughout the year. They were simple declarative statements that seemed to fit her demeanor and style of teaching:

I will be on time each and every day unless something unexpected happens.

I will be prepared with a quality lesson.



I will keep learning so I can challenge myself and all of you.

I will respect and honor you and acknowledge you frequently.

I will be available for extra help every day unless I am called to a special meeting of some kind.

I will always care about you.

I asked what was her motivation to write these commitments down for her students and her reply was simple, “They deserve the best *me* and by writing them down it keeps me honest.” Writing down a few commitment statements sends a very caring message to your students. It says you are there for them and you can be counted on to act responsibly as an adult. For your class, you might want to consider jotting down a few commitment statements and then discuss your rationale for doing so.