



# Working with Students

## Who Are

## 'Difficult'

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**E**ach school year, teachers look forward to receiving their class roster. As the list is scrutinized, individual names emerge from the group. Typically, they belong to students who carry reputations—occasionally good, but typically troublesome.

### Josie

Josie's\* reputation preceded her. She had never spent more than six weeks at school. Inevitably something happened, and she was sent to the district's alternative school. When Josie's name first appeared on my roster, I (Lauren) hoped not to "deal" with her very long. But then I

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became challenged to keep her in school—for at least six weeks and a day. I vowed to "deal" with Josie regularly and not as she had come to expect.

### Strategies That Worked

**Start early.** Call home before a student is in trouble—find a positive reason to communicate within the first few days of school. On Josie's second day, I called her father to express how impressed I was with Josie's organizational skills. Our exchange was brief but powerful. Later I called to report a behavior problem. Josie's father was extremely supportive, because I already had established a positive relationship.

**Praise publicly.** Students want to know that they are appreciated. Seize opportunities to praise students, especially those unused to it. Josie was a fantastic artist. Whenever I could, I used a piece of her artwork as a class example and watched her beam with pride. Josie was rarely in the positive spotlight. Her artwork provided a natural way to put her there.

**Punish privately.** When you must reprimand a student, addressing the issue privately will communicate respect and allow your reprimand to be personal and sincere. When Josie needed reminders about my expectations, I asked her to step into the hallway. Without the distraction of others, she could focus on my words and know that I cared enough about her to keep the moment private.

\*Pseudonym

**Know their stories.** When you are aware of a student's personal history or family background, you are more likely to understand the reason(s) for his or her behaviors. Yet, rather than allowing students to fall back on upbringing as an excuse for inappropriate behaviors, teach them that education and responsible choice can be tickets out of tough situations. Josie had a difficult home life, where frequent adult outbursts, fights, and parole hearings were common. When she felt threatened at school, she mirrored her family's typical reactions. Though she always faced consequences for poor behavior, she and I also discussed alternative responses in case a similar situation arose again.

**Uphold your authority.** Unless the student has harmed or threatened to harm another student, manage the situation yourself. Once you dismiss a student to the office, in the eyes of the student, you have surrendered some of yourself. Upholding my authority was difficult, yet I resolved not to send Josie to the office unless absolutely necessary. I wanted Josie to see that I was personally committed to her success.

## Isaac

At first Isaac\* had trouble staying awake in class. Though I (Josh) first suspected my teaching, I learned later that he was on pain medication. On a weekend outing, Isaac and a friend decided it would be fun to throw an aerosol can into a bonfire. The can ignited, severely burning Isaac's leg. Once off medication, though, Isaac remained subdued. He dressed in baggy pants, spiked his hair, and daydreamed constantly about girls and skateboarding. I wanted to help Isaac tap into his unfocused potential.

## Strategies That Worked

**Get students involved.** Students need to know they are valued. Allowing them to participate in various classroom tasks and responsibilities gives them feelings of school pride and self-worth. Organizing instructional materials and assisting other students gave Isaac purpose in the classroom.

**Pay attention to interests.** Learn what matters to students. At the start of the year,

Isaac completed an interest inventory that described who he was and what he liked to do. I learned that he was an avid skateboarder. From then on, I brought up skateboarding during classroom lessons and casual conversations, knowing it was a topic that could keep Isaac involved.

**Make a connection.** Sponsoring a club, attending sporting events, or talking with students during lunch and recess connects you with students outside of class. In addition to my regular classroom, Isaac attended a smaller class I taught on test-taking skills for students with low standardized test scores. In this class, I had time to address Isaac's specific needs, build rapport, and demonstrate my commitment to his success.

**Maintain consistency and structure.** Explain your expectations in the beginning, and remind students constantly. Follow through with all consequences and rewards. When you do not follow through—even on strict consequences threatened in haste—you lose a bit of authority and trustworthiness. Over time, those bits add up, and students may falter in the lack of structure.

Isaac wasn't disruptive; just easily distracted. To address this behavior, I created a weekly behavior contract, stating that if he successfully met the established expectations, I would reward him. In the last seconds of class on Friday of the contract's first week, Isaac lost his reward. Though he pleaded "let it slide," I did not. Isaac was disappointed, but he was inspired to work harder the next week.

## Conclusion: Hope for Them

Not every strategy will work for every student, but there is always something that can bring improved performance and lasting change. If nothing else, simply have hope. For Josie and Isaac, life had been discouraging. They needed someone to have enough hope in them to show interest, start conversation, and establish mutual respect. Though Josie did not escape her established alternative school pattern, she did finish eighth grade with her classmates, and Isaac began to notice and believe in his own potential. Hope for change made the difference. 