

Q & As about 'Difficult Students'

Presented and Answered by Josh L Patterson and Lauren E. Peters

Q. Recently I taught an introductory class with many students who were not motivated by the subject and my teaching strategies. What are some techniques to spur motivation?

A. *I would start with a class survey.* Ask the students a variety of questions, such as:

- What was your favorite school class ever? Why was it your favorite class?
- What are some things you enjoy doing in class? (Playing review games, doing projects, etc.)
- Name one teacher who you really enjoyed. Why did you enjoy having this teacher so much?
- What motivates you? (Grades, making your parents proud, candy, rewards, etc.)

The students' responses should give you a few ideas of what they like and don't like. Simply asking them these types of questions shows them that you care while simultaneously giving you insight into what motivates them. From there, try to incorporate as many of their ideas as possible. They may not always be how you would choose to teach (for example, I thrive on order and organization, so group projects make me nervous...) but you might find that the student engagement is worth doing something outside of your own comfort zone.

Q. Do you believe that some administrators see "writing up" students often (even though it is necessary for disciplinary reasons) as a result of weakness of the teacher?

A. *It depends.* I (Lauren, teacher) had a week earlier this month where I wrote up about five kids...but it wasn't about anything having to do with my classroom. Two were repeated hallway offenses that the AP and I had done everything in our power to solve without getting to the "referral" point, and the others were random things that I caught kids doing—graffiti in the bathroom, a 6th grader skipping class, and a 7th grader threatening another kid.

From my perspective as an administrator (Josh), students do not continue to misbehave unless there is truly a problem. In situations like this, you need to get to the "heart" of the problem. Attempt to have extended conversation with the parent, have the student speak with the guidance counselor, conduct a parent/teacher conference so you can empathetically communicate your concerns. Do all that you can to "unmask" the difficulties the student is having. In spite of all these efforts, if the student continues to misbehave, maintain open communication with your administrator. If your administrator truly believes you have done everything you can possibly do, sending the repeat offender to the office will not be perceived as a weakness.

Q. Does the Focus Club work for Kindergartners?

A. Yes. Everyone needs positive reinforcement, and the sooner those kids are mentored out of their behaviors, the better!

Q. What types of strategies do you suggest using when the majority of your class could be considered as exhibiting "difficult" behaviors? Many students in failing schools frequently exhibit this kind of behavior as a social tool with their peers and as a defense mechanism.

A. I (Lauren) currently teach an 8th grade science class like yours. There are a few “high fliers” in the class, but—for whatever reason—the majority of the class is made up of students who consistently fail their academic classes, spend a good amount of time in trouble for inappropriate behavior, and don’t seem to care when they receive consequences for their actions. Since consequences aren’t typically effective, I’ve adopted a “the best defense is a good offense” strategy.

I would suggest taking a class survey, asking questions such as:

- What was your favorite school class ever? Why was it your favorite class?
- What are some things you enjoy doing in class? (Playing review games, doing projects, etc.)
- Name one teacher who you really enjoyed. Why did you enjoy having this teacher?
- What motivates you? (Grades, making your parents proud, candy, rewards, etc.)

Some of the students will give the repetitive “I don’t like school” answer, but some of the students will answer honestly and give you a few ideas of what they like and don’t like. Simply asking them such questions shows that you care, while simultaneously giving you insight into what motivates them. From there, try to incorporate as many of their ideas as possible.

Their choices may not always be your preferred method to teach (for example, I thrive on order and organization, so group projects make me nervous...) but you might find that the student engagement is worth doing something outside of your own comfort zone. With my difficult class, I’ve started using their preferences as rewards. For example, many of the kids in that class like to work together to complete assignments. When possible, I reward them with paired work. I set my expectations for the teaching portion of class and tell them that, if they can meet those expectations, I’ll let them work in pairs for the daily assignment. There are days when they don’t earn the reward, but once I proved I was serious—expectations not met result in silent work rather than pairs—the students have started working harder to follow directions.

Q. Why shouldn’t a student be student of the week for consecutive weeks to reinforce his/her positive behavior (especially if he/she exhibits the same behavior that awarded the designation)?

A. Though I have never chosen the same student two weeks in a row, I don’t think that it would necessarily be a “bad” thing. If the student is meeting expectations and demonstrating desired behaviors, he/she should definitely be considered for a two-week run (especially if the student is one of your “difficult” kids!).

Q. How do you reach a student who always uses inappropriate language to classmates and staff members alike?

- A.** At the middle and high school level, students know better than to curse in class, and “profanity” is listed among the rule violations in our handbook. Each offense earns a more serious consequence, starting with a warning/phone call home and building to Out of School Suspension for continued “abusive language.”

If the problem occurs in an elementary school, however, I would venture to guess that one of two things is going on: (1) the student doesn’t actually know how inappropriate his/her word choices are, or (2) the student does know and is testing his/her boundaries. Either way, a behavior plan needs to be set up, beginning with a conference about why the language is inappropriate. Discuss more appropriate ways to express the same emotions behind his/her inappropriate word choices and establish clear expectations and consequences if those expectations aren’t met. Discuss your plan with the other staff members involved, and work as a team to implement the plan.

- Q.** **As a student teacher with several students who consistently show defiance, act out for attention, refuse to listen to me, and tell me “no,” how can I set a level of authority with my students that they will respect?**

- A.** I had a very similar experience when I was student teaching. Though young, my mentor teacher had a great handle on behavior and when I stepped into her shoes – with my extremely inexperienced feet—the students immediately started “testing” me. I was at the same level of frustration with their defiance, acting out, disruption, and “pushing my buttons” that eventually, I really couldn’t take it any longer.

Following a rough Friday, I decided to re-explain my role in the classroom on the following Monday. My mentor teacher worked with me to set up a system of expectations and consequences and stood at the back of the room in support of me, displaying an “I dare you to try anything...” look. As I revisited my role, I spoke honestly and firmly, telling the students that I was frustrated by some of their behavior choices and needed to clarify my role in the classroom. I reminded them that I was a “real” teacher with “real” teacher powers; that is, I knew the code to the teacher’s lounge and how to get a referral from the office.

“While I am teaching,” I said, “I expect you to listen, raise your hands to speak, and follow my instructions, respecting them as you do with ‘Mrs. Jones.’” It was the same talk I’d given at the beginning of my student teaching, except with a little more firmness. Just as had happened then, one brave soul decided to “test” me by interrupting once my mentor left the room. The difference between the first speech and the second was my follow through. This time when the interrupter spoke out again five minutes after being warned about his inappropriate behavior, I calmly said that I’d see him in lunch detention, and I moved on with the lesson. It will take commitment, but once you make them believers, they’ll see that you’re not one to “mess” with.

- Q.** **What are some good incentives to get junior high schoolers to start doing homework? Zeros, calls home, and detentions are not working. The policy is no late work, zeros up front . . . but I have so many students who really do not care.**

A. This is a tough one. Some students just do not see the purpose in completing their homework. Additionally, there is a whole battle about the effectiveness of homework. Here's a thought—don't assign any. Really! Conduct an action-research project and go an entire unit without assigning homework. See how the students perform when they are tested. Before you kill yourself trying to get students to complete their homework, make sure it's really worth dying for.

Q. What if the principal walks in and says that the students already know the expectations?

A. And if this is not true...you might want to find another school to work.

Q. Why do students choose to be difficult? What can I do to prevent problems with these students?

A. There are many reasons students can be difficult. Many students who are difficult have unmet physical or emotional needs. For example, students who are hungry, tired, or worried about a family member can become unstable. Their responses to these situations can vary and, in some cases, be displayed with defiance or non-cooperation. Difficult student can also become more obvious in classes that are not engaging or purposeful. The one thing you can do to prevent problems with "difficult" students is to build relationships with them. Let them see that you are a real person and not just an adult superior. Let them see that, whatever they do, you still care about them.

Q. What can you do with students who ask inappropriate questions, especially at the high school level?

A. Conference with the student. Explain the situation to the student and make the student aware that you do not appreciate his/her inappropriate questions. As the student continues to ask inappropriate questions, immediately remove the student from the class each time and explain your disapproval. If the situation persists, let the student know that further consequences will be necessary (i.e. detentions, office referral). Continuing to ask inappropriate questions is a sign of disrespect and an obvious struggle of power between you and the student. In situations like this, do all you can to build positive relationships. Older students do not respect teachers in the same way as younger students—respect must be earned; it is not automatically given because of your position.

Q. What do the postcards that you send to parents contain?

A. Simply a positive comment regarding the student's recent academic/behavioral performance.

Q. What do you do when a "difficult" student's behavior starts triggers poorer behavior in the rest of the class?

A. I would begin by conferencing with the student. Explain that you see real leadership ability, but that you need the student to lead in a positive way. With these students, I hold regular conferences to point out the time(s) you notice his/her leadership (positive and negative). It may be necessary to come up with an award system between you and the student. Also make continued efforts to

involve the student's parents. If the situation continues, I would speak to an administrator. It may become necessary to move the student to another class or look into other options for the student.

Q. What do you do when a student runs an errand and doesn't return for another half-hour?

A. Have the student make up the time with you at lunch- or after-school detention. Also, I would conference with the student to explain that his/her behaviors have caused you to question your trust in the student's ability to be responsible. Let him/her know that he/she will not be allowed to leave the classroom again (outside of going to the restroom), but if he/she shows that he/she can be trusted, you will allow him/her more freedoms.

Q. Do you think that calling a parent frequently about his/her child's behavior is effective?

A. In all honesty, yes. You may become frustrated with frequent calling, but it is important to continue soliciting the support of parents when concerns arise with their child. I have found that there tends to be a cycle. Initially parents are willing to support you, but after frequent calls may become frustrated, but eventually they come around and change will occur. Persistence and patience pay off. With each and every call, communicate care and genuine concern, and remember to look at the big picture and not the day-to-day occurrences.