Classroom Management: A Three-Legged Stool

By Randy Sprick

One of the hardest tasks in teaching is managing the behavior of students. Yet without effective classroom management strategies in place, it becomes almost impossible to teach students the social and academic skills they need to successfully assume productive roles in society.

Many districts have adopted CHAMPS (for grades K-8) and Discipline in the Secondary Classroom (for grades 9-12) as their model to address classroom management.

Unfortunately, simple exposure to classroom management strategies may not translate into effective management plans in the classroom. More is often needed. As an administrator or member of a leadership team, you can help develop a solid implementation plan by attending to three important variables in your staff training.

The Three-Legged Stool

Think about a three-legged stool for a moment. The stool represents a solid platform that enables you to reach higher. Each leg is vital to the stability of the stool. If one of the legs is too short, you could easily topple over.

Similarly, if the stool is stable, but too short, you need to lengthen the legs. But you can’t just lengthen one or two. You have to extend all three legs equally in order to insure that the stool is balanced and at the right height to meet your needs.

We can think of classroom management as a three-legged stool. One leg is training. One leg is administrative expectations and monitoring. The final leg is coaching support. All three of these legs will provide you with an effective classroom management implementation in your building or district.

The illustration shows the three components that support effective classroom management.

Let’s look at each separately.

The First Leg: Training

CHAMPS, Discipline in the Secondary Classroom (DSC), or any other evidence-based classroom management
model is best implemented with training. Training should communicate what research identifies as best practice.

The best behavior management strategies address five areas of behavioral intervention: prevention, expectations, monitoring, encouragement, and correction. CHAMPS and DSC training helps teachers remember these strategies, using the acronym STOIC:

- **Structure** for success.
  Organize classrooms and class activities to discourage misbehavior and encourage student engagement and motivation. Structure encompasses both physical and logistical considerations.

- **Teach** expectations.
  Teach students how to function successfully within the structure. To be successful, students need to know their teachers’ clear expectations for all major instructional activities and transitions.

- **Observe** and monitor.
  Circulate throughout the classroom unpredictably and scan frequently. Remain physically and visually aware of what’s going on in the room at all times. Collect observational data on student behavior to spot trends and patterns and inform interventions.

- **Interact** positively.
  Provide both contingent praise and noncontingent positive attention. Students will always behave better and work harder for someone who values them and cares about their success.

- **Correct** fluently.
  Respond to undesired behavior calmly, consistently, briefly, and immediately. A fluent correction does not disrupt the flow of instruction.

Together, these variables represent five essential elements of a well-managed classroom. Teachers who excel at managing a classroom tend to accomplish this feat in their own unique (and often unconscious) ways. Consequently, while research addresses the variables that influence student behavior, teachers can legitimately address these elements in a multitude of ways. Using STOIC as a guide, teachers can craft effective, research-based classroom management plans that create the positive classroom environments needed to support learning.

**Training and Schedules**

The structure of your training can impact your results. Ongoing training yields better results than a one-time workshop. Effective training distributed across time creates opportunities for participants to share ideas and work with plans such as drafts of schedules or room arrangements. Distributed training gives participants a chance to try out new techniques and then discuss what worked and what did not.

There are many effective training schedules.

- **One or two days of training in summer with quarterly half-day follow-up**
  1. In this model, an experienced trainer provides an inservice that introduces tasks that are most essential for setting up a management plan for the first day of school.
2. In mid-autumn, the trainer and participants meet to discuss what has worked well and what has not. Then new content is taught on increasing student motivation.

3. In midwinter, the group meets for another half-day of discussion and the trainer introduces new content to address chronic misbehavior.

4. Finally in spring, the group discusses strategies for wrapping up the year and determines how chronic problems that occurred might be prevented with planning for more structure and detailed behavioral lessons in the next school year.

- **College-credit class with twelve 3-hour sessions**

  1. Each class session focuses on one chapter of CHAMPS or DSC (with longer chapters covered across two sessions).

  2. A trainer presents important concepts and procedures from a chapter of CHAMPS or DSC in each class and works with the self-assessments provided in the chapter. Peer discussion tasks that are included at the end of each chapter are completed in class. Each class ends with an assignment to be carried out in the classroom.

  3. Classes begin with a review of content from the previous class and a debriefing of the assignment, followed by an introduction to the new content of the next chapter, peer discussion of the end-of-chapter tasks, and a new classroom assignment.

- **Monthly faculty study on a particular chapter of CHAMPS or DSC**
  This is similar to the model above, but includes all staff and is distributed throughout the year. These meetings could be conducted on early-release days. Participation by the entire faculty increases the likelihood that the training will favorably affect the culture and climate of the school. Meeting nine or ten times allows each chapter to be covered so staff is not overwhelmed with too much content too quickly.

- **Voluntary staff study groups that meet regularly**
  Rather than formal training sessions with a skilled presenter, this model requires a small group of motivated staff who work through CHAMPS or DSC together. Structured presentations are not necessary. Each week, a different participant can be responsible for bringing snacks and guiding the discussion. These sessions can be conducted weekly, biweekly, or monthly.

In addition to formal training, administrators can prompt staff to apply what they’ve learned by:

- Periodically encouraging teachers to self-monitor and reflect on their efficacy. Self-assessments at the back of the CHAMPS and DSC chapters can help teachers judge the degree to which their current management plan and level of structure is working.

- Arranging for brief discussions, practice opportunities, or mini-inservices during staff meetings.

- Setting up peer coaching opportunities so teachers observe and discuss classroom management practices with one another.
The Second Leg: Administrative Expectations and Monitoring

Even with solid training routines, some teachers may not implement the effective classroom management strategies they learn. You may still have some teachers whose classrooms are chaotic and whose students are off-task.

Administrators should be able to identify these situations in a 3–5 minute drop-in visit or walk-through. When conducting a walk-through, ask:

**Are at least 90 percent of students engaged in the lesson?**

- During teacher-directed activities, are students actively responding and following directions?
- During independent work, are students on task with such activities as reading, writing, drawing, and so on?
- During cooperative tasks, are all groups discussing and working on assigned tasks?

**Are at least 95 percent of students behaving respectfully in the classroom?**

- Do students ask questions and make comments with a respectful tone when talking with the teacher?
- Do students ask questions and make comments with a respectful tone and words when talking with each other?
- Do students demonstrate respect through their eye contact and body language?
- If a student behaves disrespectfully, does the teacher address the problem effectively, preventing the misbehavior from affecting other students?

**Are at least 95 percent of students complying with the teacher’s posted expectations?**

If students are actively engaged in the lesson and respectful, posted expectations should not be the critical focus of an administrator’s walk-through. However, if students are exhibiting behavioral problems, ask:

- Are classroom rules posted?
- Is the teacher actively observing student behavior by circulating and scanning? Is the teacher interacting positively with students (maintaining at least a 3:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions)?
- Is the teacher correcting misbehavior fluently (calmly, consistently, briefly, and immediately)?

**If It Ain’t Broke...**

The basic premise of administrator walk-throughs, more formal observations, or evaluations is "if it isn't broken, don’t try to fix it." When students are already meeting the criteria described above, share the good news with the teacher and commend the teacher for doing a great job.
On the other hand, when there are issues with classroom management, administrators should encourage the teacher to discuss the problem. Does he or she perceive the problem? Was this 5 minutes an anomaly or the norm? Does the teacher have an idea of how to address the concern?

If the teacher has a reasonably sound idea about how to address an issue, encourage the teacher to carry on and then check back in a few days or weeks to see how it is going. If a teacher is unsure about how to fix a problem, suggest options such as working with a coach. Set a target date for improvement, and check back periodically to monitor progress.

**The Third Leg: Coaching**

Instructional coaching is often the third leg needed in an all-encompassing staff development plan. Teachers have to make so many instantaneous decisions while teaching that using newfound knowledge can be lost in the barrage of minute-to-minute tasks they must accomplish. Coaching can help teachers focus on changes that will improve their classroom management and teaching.

Coaching is also an important factor for teachers who have a long history of trying to control student behavior. Teachers who try to gain control of students with reactive and punitive methods may feel initially that they are being asked to give up what little control they may have had. Because these teachers are often in power struggles with students and engage in a cycle of misbehavior and negative responses, change will require a great deal of support from coaches.

A good instructional coach can help teachers internalize the skills they learn in training. A coach teaches, models, guides, inspires, and provides feedback—all in a collaborative, nonevaluative manner. In a solid implementation, a three-legged training model, designated professionals are available to support teachers.

To be effective, coaches must be trained in the same model of classroom management as teachers who will receive the coaching. Common training ensures that underlying frameworks or structures are reinforced and that the coach and teachers have the same language for discussing how to engage in continuous improvement.

Coaches may have the label of coach, but others who act as coaches may be school counselors, department chairs, deans of students, behavior specialists, or teachers on assignment. The essential element is that coaches and teachers be trained in the same model of classroom management.

Coaching is the third leg that gives the stool strength and stability. Without coaching, the effect of professional development is muted. Teachers who are the most effective at classroom management are likely to benefit the most from training alone. Those who are least effective are less likely to implement their newfound knowledge. With coaching, the benefits of training can be maximized.

**The Three-Legged Stool Redux**

Here’s how it works with all three legs of the stool balanced and in place using Mrs. Nelson as an example:

- **Training**: Mrs. Nelson attends training in CHAMPS or DSC along with her fellow teachers and the district's instructional coaches.

- **Administrative Expectations and Monitoring**: The administrator conducts a five-minute walk-through in Mrs. Nelson’s class. Mrs. Nelson tends to stand and lecture all period. There is little to no student engagement. The principal and Mrs. Nelson talk about the importance of engagement. The principal suggests that Mrs. Nelson ask the building coach to work with her. He also sets up a follow-up observation in two to three weeks.
Coaching: Mrs. Nelson requests help from the coach. The coach observes and then helps her identify a range of strategies, using the STOIC framework (structure, teach, observe, interact positively, correct fluently) to set up an implementation plan. Once the plan is established, the coach offers to model a lesson, co-teach, and then provide subsequent observation/discussion opportunities.

It may be possible for a teacher to develop and implement an effective classroom management plan without clear administrative expectations, training, or coaching—but for a district committed to excellence, it should not be left to chance. Training by itself may have limited implementation with teachers who are struggling with difficult classes. Training paired with administrative expectations and monitoring can create a motivation to improve. Finally, coaching can help teachers adopt new strategies and develop a sense of efficacy with students and the building administrator. The triumvirate of training, administrative expectations and monitoring, and coaching—the three legs of the stool—provide a balanced and solid platform upon which to build and implement truly effective classroom management.