Problem solved

Students Wanted:
No Training Provided

Includes FREE Lesson Plan
and Reproducible Student Handout

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As I travel around the country training teachers, I always begin each workshop by asking the same question: What are the worst problems in your classroom? From Kotzebue, Alaska to Miami, Florida, the answer is always the same. Teachers are really worn down by serious classroom management problems like disruption, disinterest, and tardiness. The solution may surprise you.

I bet you’ve never thought about it but few schools have any plan whatsoever to train kids to be students— and the rampant problems with student behavior reflects that overwhelming oversight. So, even though you have a carefully crafted curriculum plan to teach academics, no comparable curriculum or plan exists to train kids to become prepared, motivated, students who can fully benefit from your academic offerings. The result: You work with untrained, unmotivated kids. Whether they are second graders, or twelfth graders, you are attempting to teach students who may never have been systematically taught how to raise their hand, talk one at a time, or even recognize that school is important. That’s why the kids in your classroom don’t look, act or sound like students.

There are dozens of skills that youngsters are expected to have in order to be successful students. I call these abilities “School Skills.” When you expect School Skills without teaching those skills, it’s no different than expecting math skills that you never taught. You would never expect students to learn untaught math, but somehow we do expect students to learn and use untaught School Skills. Expecting kids to teach themselves how to be students may be a lot like expecting kids to teach themselves how to swim. Just as some students would sink in the water, each year you see students who sink in school.
It is important to acknowledge that many teachers—especially at the elementary level—do take it upon themselves to teach School Skills even though there is no formal mandate or even a curriculum to guide how to provide this training. However, since there is no standardized curriculum, we never know exactly which teacher is teaching exactly what skill when. Ms. Green may insist that hand raising is taught in second grade, but Mrs. Black may determine that it belongs in first grade. Mr. Gray may not teach the mechanics of hand raising at all but does still require it in his classroom. Because there is no district-wide curriculum, School Skills are taught in a haphazard fashion, leading to gaps, omissions and delays in children’s training to be students. In most districts, School Skills Training is left to chance, at best a random system of non-instruction—then we wonder why students struggle in school. Can you imagine what would happen if we taught academics in such a haphazard manner? Yet, that is how we offer foundation School Skills to youngsters—even though students need those School Skills to be able to fully benefit from the carefully planned academic curriculum. In most schools, all the planning and energy is devoted to establishing an academic curriculum, while no curriculum of any type exists to prepare kids to be students so they can take advantage of the academics. That is why classroom management can seem impossible. You are expecting appropriate behavior from students who have never been taught exactly what that is, and may have no clue how to perform those untaught skills.

To improve classroom management, teach School Skills before expecting them. It’s such a simple, commonsense idea that’s easy to do. The typical teacher wastes about 22 minutes per 50 minute period on on-demand behavior management. How about taking just a tiny portion of that lost instruction time and transforming it into School Skills Training time. In my workshops, teachers always ask which problems should they tackle first. I recommend you make a list of the worst classroom management problems then prioritize the ones that are the worst for you. It is a personal ranking with no right or wrong answers, although safety issues must always be at the top of the list. Next, I recommend tackling the top three problems at a time. The problems can include any issues you see in class, from talk-outs to attendance, from poor motivation to discussion skills, from how to sit at a desk to what to wear and bring to school.

Teach School Skills step-by-step, in a manner that is very similar to how you teach academics. Pictured below are a few pages from my Students’ Guide to the Care and Heeding of Teachers handout (excerpted from The Last Chance School Success Guide book). It’s a fun, fast activity, and it’s a great way to teach students how to wait for help from teachers. This activity can eliminate that chronic classroom management issue of students using problem behaviors while waiting for help from the teacher.

To help you get acquainted with School Skills Training resources, you can download the full lesson plan and all the guide pages here: http://www.youthchg.com/strategies.html.
Want more information on how School Skills Training can reduce or eliminate even your worst classroom management problems? Read this article that can offer you additional resources: http://www.youthchg.com/articles.html#techniques.

Ruth Herman Wells M.S. is the Director of Youth Change Workshops, http://www.youthchg.com. Her Breakthrough Strategies to Teach and Counsel Troubled Youth Workshop will be in Seattle, WA on May 2-3, 2013, and in Portland, OR on October 10-11, 2013. Ruth's workshops are offered online, at your site, and in general sessions, all with college credit and free clock hours. Ruth's books include The Last Chance School Success Guide and Turn On the Turned-Off Student. Email Ruth at dwells@youthchg.com or call 800-545-5736. Get Ruth's free Problem Student Problem-Solver Magazine and hundreds of other interventions at www.youthchg.com.