Middle School Classroom Management That Works

Like many other teachers in our state, I was fortunate to have grown up in a successful, well-established choir program run by a revered music educator. Given my choral upbringing, I had no idea how much work went into establishing such a well-oiled machine. I certainly never considered that classroom management might be a challenge for me when I became a teacher. Then I had my first day on the job.

As a December graduate, job opportunities weren’t plentiful, so I accepted the first job that was offered—I would be this school’s fourth choir teacher in less than six months! With this instability, you can imagine that my wide-eyed expectations for my first day as an eager new teacher were quickly dashed. Students in every class were uncontrollable, and my day ended without even the slightest opportunity to formally introduce myself. I went home in tears, planning my escape.

Thankfully, a lot has changed in the 10 years since that first day—likely because I’ve learned a lot since then. I have devoted much of my career to becoming as knowledgeable as I can about middle school choir classroom management. After being an assistant director for many years, I am now implementing techniques I learned under master teachers in my own middle school program. Whether you’re new to this job or you’re looking for different strategies to try, I hope the methods that have worked for me can help you establish better classroom management:

Never vary your “walking in the room” routine. In our classroom, students enter the room, put backpacks behind the risers, and then get their binders. I stand at the piano in the center of the room greeting students with my grading clipboard in hand. When the bell rings, students begin chanting in unison, “one—shh, two—shh, three—shh…” with their hands on their rib cages. During that time, I document who is not on the risers doing the “self-start” routine, causing their weekly choir skill grade to decrease by five points. (Yes, being on the risers with your binder ready to begin when the bell rings is a gradable skill!) After cutting them off, immediately begin typical vocal and body warm-ups with everyone focused and ready to go.

Any variation on this particular self-start exercise could work, provided it engages their vocal cords to stop conversation and creates immediate focus on the choral environment.

Have a regular class routine you follow every (typical) day. Students should quickly become familiar with it. This provides the foundation on which you can switch things up with a new warm-up or a fun sightreading game. By setting firm boundaries from the beginning of school, you give yourself freedom to be a more creative and innovative teacher. Take this to the next level by displaying the daily plan so each student can quickly see what to expect. They will be comforted when it is business as usual and excited when they see an unfamiliar or fun activity listed.

Our typical 45-minute class structure is the following:

• 10 minutes: Self-start, body and vocal warm-ups, and solfège drills
• 10–15 minutes: Theory (musical terms, sight-reading, rhythm lesson, etc.)
• 5 minutes or less: Announcements (field trips, forms, behavior expectations, etc.)
• 10–15 minutes: Literature work (singing, marking scores, diction, etc.)
• 1 minute or less: End-of-class routine (dismissed one row at a time)

This doesn’t preclude Fun Friday activities or occasional special projects, but students need to know what to expect in class every day and be prepared for any type of alteration, including assemblies or how to behave during emergency drills. This brings up another point:

**Practice good behavior!** You might need to spend 30–45 minutes of each class for several days in a row entering the classroom or putting away binders and leaving the classroom. I don’t believe this is excessive. Do not compromise, even if just one or two students aren’t complying; we all know those students can continue to disrupt the environment for the entire school year. Plan for the first several weeks of each year to be centered on establishing and practicing classroom procedure.

When you have students practice the self-start routine at the beginning of the year, offer a small prize for the first student who begins the warm-up on the next day. Then, cut them off, mimic the school bell sound, and have the students practice self-starting several more times. Your classes will begin focused and on time each day just from practicing this skill a few times in every class the first week of school.

Make the goals for your fall concert simple: demonstrate good behavior on- and offstage and deliver some musical moments. Take the class time necessary to teach appropriate concert performance and audience behavior.

**REFOCUSING**

In addition to starting class successfully, refocusing students with a “be quiet” signal is equally essential. I have found two methods most helpful: (1) softly singing *oh-oh-oh* on the pitches sol-mi-sol and having the students echo sing back, repeating as needed, and (2) the often used *clap-clap clap-clap-clap* that takes us all back to elementary school (but consider that talking can continue during clapping). Practice these exercises by asking the students to start talking (it’s shocking what strange noises middle schoolers will make when you give them permission to talk), then sing or clap your “be quiet” routine to see how fast they can echo and become silent. Middle school students love to practice this over and over because you repeatedly allow them be loud and goofy! Practice this skill several times throughout the class periods at the beginning of the year and you will be extremely thankful for its lasting impact.

Finally, being a stern authoritarian will not work for many middle school choir directors. We shouldn’t, however, confuse the words **strict** or **structured** with **mean** or **rude**. I have heard some teachers express how they wished they had been meaner in the beginning, but I would argue that establishing a structured classroom environment with clearly defined boundaries allows for strong choir bonds, plentiful laughter, and maximized learning.

Those of us called to teach middle school find great joy in helping students figure out who they are, come together as a team for a common goal, and discover a love for singing. By establishing routines that set our classroom up for success, we will enjoy the freedom to simply teach and pass on our passion for choral music.

**Jodi Coke** is the choir director at Hillwood MS in Keller ISD.