



SMART CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

How To Manage Whole-Class Behavior While Working With A Small Group

It's frustrating.

You start your class working on an independent project, a writing assignment, or a rotation of centers, then begin quietly calling selected students for small-group instruction.

And for the first few minutes it goes well.

But just as you settle in and begin quality guided work with your small group, there is a disruption. And then another . . . and another.

Perhaps you hear giggling and silliness. Maybe you notice daydreaming and off-task behavior. Maybe you feel the presence of two or three students standing behind you, waiting to ask a question or tattle on a classmate.

Whatever the case, if your students are unable to work without interrupting you or needing you at their beck and call, then you'll never be able to meet with small groups – at least not in a way that makes it worthwhile.

You'll have to stop and bark out warnings, reminders, and exhortations. You'll have to get up and pinball around the room. You'll have to [check in, check on, and toggle](#) your attention like an air-traffic controller, all the while thinking that perhaps the whole exercise is a waste of time.

When confronted with a classroom management issue like this, many teachers look for a particular technique to match the particular situation. (e.g., *What do I do when students throw spit wads while my back is turned?*)

But effective classroom management doesn't work this way. It isn't a first-aid kit of quick fixes you apply to existing problems. You can't say to yourself, "The students are throwing spit wads eh? Okay then, no problem, I'll just give them the old doppelhanger technique?"

No, to fix it, you have to go back to the root cause of the problem.

In this case, the students outside the small group are misbehaving because they're *unprepared* to work independently, and thus don't do it well. *This* is the root cause that must be addressed. Your class must first prove that they can work on their own — under your observing eye — for at least the length of time you wish to meet with small groups.

Only then can you start calling students to your back table.

To get to this point, your lessons prior to releasing your students to independent work must be vibrant, precise, and presented with clarity. Your students must know step-by-step what their independent responsibilities are and be able to refer to them on an easel, screen, or whiteboard. You have to check for understanding and guide them through a detailed practice of whatever it is you want them to do.

And once they do start their independent work, you must wean them off the expectation that you're available to guide, remind, or reteach individually what was taught to the entire class minutes before.

You have to show them through directed teaching and modeling that once the lesson has been taught, the responsibility for learning shifts in total from you to them.

Because that's what independent work is.

This understanding and realization, however, is incredibly empowering to students, and you'll notice dramatic improvement in listening, learning, focus, and concentration. But creating a fiercely independent class doesn't happen overnight.

Many students have such deeply ingrained learned helplessness that it can take three or four weeks before your class is ready for you to begin working with small groups. Once they prove their independence, though, you can begin pulling students without worry, stress, or interruption.

It's okay and a good idea to periodically peek up from your small group to make sure all is well. After all, good teaching requires you to verify anything and everything you ask of your students. But other than these momentary visual checks, you can focus entirely on your responsibilities.

And your students can focus on theirs.