RULES AND CONSEQUENCES

“We ask for strength and the Great Spirit gives us difficulties, which makes us strong.”

— NATIVE AMERICAN PRAYER
ALL TEACHERS, either overtly or subtly, employ rules and consequences. This chapter is about how Mrs. Allgood uses them — both what she does and why she does it. It’s divided into three main sections: principles, rules, and consequences. Principles are the underlying “big picture” goals for the class. Rules and consequences are specific classroom behavior policies that help support the principles.

Before getting into the details, let’s take a look at the big picture. There is an ongoing philosophical debate in education about the need for and the use of consequences. This is discussed at the end of the chapter in the section called “Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation.” My stance is that prevention should be the dominant focus of teachers, and that ideally, assuming the best about students, preparing, caring, and our inner authority are what make a true difference in the classroom and in our students’ lives.
The reality is, however, that all of us, especially when we first start out, need stuff we can use right away. And consequences are often the “stuff” that does the trick. Thus, this chapter has a lot of strategies and approaches in it. I don’t try to sell any particular one. Try some of the strategies on and see if they fit. However, even as you use rules and consequences, please don’t rely too heavily on them as a mechanical substitute for your genuine and personal enthusiasm for your students and their learning.

Principles

Principles are akin to guidelines. They are more general and often more value-laden than rules. They are not specific or behavioral in nature. But as opening “slogans” that are attached to rules, they can add a sense of underlying purpose and spirit to a list of rules and consequences. Many teachers include one or two principles as mission statements under which their rules appear. A few common principles are listed below.

- Treat each other fairly
- Respect and responsibility
- A safe place to learn
- Our classroom community
- The students have the right to learn and the teacher has the right to teach
- Safe, kind, and productive

Under any of these “umbrella” statements are five or six specific rules that “close the door” on potential misinterpretations from students.
Rules

Rules are what we can and can’t live with in our classroom. They are what we would see in the classroom if our principles were being supported.

Strategies

Wording the rules

Rules should be specific, clearly stated, and worded behaviorally, rather than morally. If we leave the door open for misinterpretation of our rules, students will leap across the threshold. The more specific, behavioral, and clear our rules are, the skinnier students will have to be to fit through that doorway. For example, “Listen attentively while other students contribute to a class discussion,” is a solid behavioral rule. Mrs. Meanswell often gets tripped up with student misinterpretation because her rules sound more like principles, such as “Respect each other.”

Limit the number of rules to five or six at the most

We can’t cover everything with only six rules, but we can address the big stuff. More than six rules will ultimately confuse and/or intimidate our students, while at the same time diluting the importance of the key rules that really matter to us.

The following are examples of specific classroom rules. Some are more appropriate for younger students, and some for older students. Some are very specific, covering only a very particular behavior, like gum chewing, while others are more fundamental.

▲ Follow directions
▲ Don’t interrupt others’ right to learn or my right to teach
▲ Be in your seat when the bell rings
▲ Follow all the school rules
▲ Listen attentively while other students contribute to a class discussion
▲ Keep hands, feet, and other objects to yourself
▲ Speak only at appropriate times
▲ Raise your hand and wait for permission to speak
▲ No put-downs
  ▲ Bring all books and materials to class
  ▲ No eating in class
  ▲ No gum-chewing in class
  ▲ Listen quietly when someone else is talking
  ▲ The teacher, not the bell, dismisses the class
  ▲ Use appropriate language
  ▲ Use a low-level voice in the classroom
  ▲ Touch other students’ belongings only with their permission
▲ Place all trash in the basket
▲ You are responsible for completing your own work, unless group work is assigned
▲ There is no “arguing with the ref” during class. If you disagree with the teacher’s decision, wait until after class to express your opinion (This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9, “Consistency”).

Which rules to choose?

There is no hard and fast rule about what rules should rule in the classroom — or what rules we should rule out. It helps to avoid some typical miscues, as exemplified by Mrs. Meanswell’s gaffes. She has rules that:

▲ She isn’t organized enough to enforce—“Late work only accepted for three days, and for gradually reduced points”
▲ She doesn’t feel strongly about, and thus doesn’t enforce consistently — “No bathroom use during instructional time”
▲ Are too specific and don’t cover enough territory —  
  “Sharpen pencils quietly”  
▲ She has copied from Mrs. Allgood across the hall, but  
  isn’t comfortable with — “No gum chewing”  
▲ Aren’t clear enough — “Respect each other”

In addition to avoiding the above mistakes, it is most important that our rules cover the main classroom behaviors and coordinate with school and district policies.

Consequences – Five Key Assumptions

Consequences are the bottom line, the cork in the bottom of the bucket that keeps the water from flowing out. Almost everything else in this book is about prevention. Consequences are about intervention. Even after we’ve done what we can in the areas of teaching procedures, assuming the best about our students, being firm and soft, not over-explaining, being consistent, and creating positive connections with our students, sometimes kids act out anyway. That’s when consequences come in.

Below are five key assumptions about consequences, followed by a rather extreme example that illustrates all five.

▲ There are no punishments, just consequences  
▲ Consequences are used as a pause to get our students’ attention  
▲ Consequences should be organized in a hierarchy, starting with the mildest first  
▲ We have no control over our students  
▲ Consequences teach students that they have the power of choice
Dan and the flying hammer

One day I was teaching woodshop as usual. I had already learned that classroom management in a woodshop class is absolutely critical, especially with my at-risk high school kids. I had to know the students could be trusted to take care of themselves and each other during those times when I was absorbed cutting wood and completely oblivious to their actions. Since natural consequences to “spacing out” in woodshop class can be permanent and disabling, such as the loss of a finger, my insistence on keeping kids focused in this class was even greater than in any other classes I taught.

On this day, I was using the table saw, which requires a high degree of concentration. Out of the corner of my eye I vaguely saw something coming toward me in the air — in surrealist slow motion. A large “implement of destruction,” a rotating hammer, slowly crossed my line of vision and careened onto the floor near my feet. I finished cutting my piece of wood, looked up in the direction from which the large implement of destruction had come, and immediately saw students scattering in the wind. Sara was suddenly fascinated with the wood planer. Eli had his nose in a book for the first time in his high school career. Dan, however, was caught like a deer in the headlights. It was clear from the position of his body and the guilty look on his face that I had found my source.

“Dan,” I said in my firm-yet-soft teacher voice, “please come over here and let’s talk a minute.” All the machinery in the shop had stopped. All eyes were on Dan, waiting to see how this drama would play itself out.

He erupted immediately, coming toward me in a hail of defense: “I didn’t! It wasn’t me! You can’t prove it! It wasn’t a large hammer! It didn’t go very far! No one was hurt! No!”
I remained as calm as I could, and simply said his name several times to calm him down. That didn’t work. Whatever was going on with Dan went beyond this simple classroom experience. “Dan,” I said again, firmly but quietly, “you need to go to the office, have a seat, and wait for me after class.” This was a standard and mild consequence at my alternative school, used for a variety of behaviors much more benign than throwing hammers in the woodshop. Dan didn’t leave, and he didn’t stop his barrage of excuses and defenses. Twice more I asked him to leave, and finally I said, “Dan, if you don’t choose to leave now, I’m going to have to suspend you for a day.” This was a much more major consequence, one that I rarely had to use. But still Dan didn’t leave nor quiet down. His arm movements and excuses kept coming in waves.

Finally I calmly said, “Dan, you’re suspended.” He stopped in his tracks. It was if his plane had suddenly landed, or his alarm clock had suddenly gone off.

“But,” he began to implore.

“Please, Dan,” I quietly responded, “don’t make it any bigger than it has to be. Please go to the office and wait for me there.” Dan finally decided to go. As soon as he left and the door closed, I looked up and suddenly the machinery was back on, Eli had abandoned his book, and class was back to its usual state of controlled chaos.

Dan was suspended that Tuesday afternoon, and he came back to school on Thursday morning with his father. Dan and his dad met the principal and me before school to work things out. Dan seemed his normal bumbling self, rather than his abnormal ranting self, and we had a relaxed conversation. Dan asked me why I suspended him, and I replied, “Dan, I didn’t suspend you for throwing the hammer. I suspended you because it was the gentlest way I could find to get your attention. Do I have your attention now? Good. Let’s talk about the rules of the woodshop...”
For five minutes, we had a cordial conversation. Dan convinced me that he could return safely to woodshop class, a class in which he actually excelled. We reviewed the rules, and that was that. As Dan was leaving the principal’s office, he said to me, “Thank you, Mr. Smith,” and walked out.

Something in that simple sentence set a light bulb off in my head. My student had just thanked me for suspending him! He wanted to learn behavior, he knew he needed to learn it, and he thanked me for suspending him. The consequence was there to provide him with the guidance that he was hungering for.

The five key assumptions about consequences are all illustrated in the above story. First, there are no punishments, just consequences. I hadn’t punished Dan; I had merely connected him with a simple consequence that did him the service of slowing him down. Even the extreme case of suspension is still a tool to teach students what they are hungry to learn.

Second, I realized that consequences are used as a pause to get our students’ attention. It just so happened that in this case, suspension was what it took.

Third, I used a hierarchy of consequences, starting with the mildest first. I slowly and calmly increased the consequences for Dan, stopping with the first one that got him to pause in his tracks. For more on this approach, check the section below called “Implementing Consequences.”

Fourth, during the confrontation with Dan, unless I used handcuffs, rope, or Velcro, I had no control over him. Calming down and ultimately following the rules were up to him. Yes, I had the power of suggestion. Yes, I could influence his decision with my voice, my tone, and/or the consequences I doled out, but ultimately the decision was his. The deeper our respect for this, the easier it is for us to remain calm and on our students’ side in moments when we wish we had control over them.
Fifth, at the end of the meeting in the principal’s office, it was affirmed that Dan had the power of choice. He became aware that he made a choice that day in the woodshop class to throw the hammer, a choice to argue with me, a choice to eventually leave the class and calm down, and a choice to abide by the rules in the future.

Let’s look at this last assumption with a sharper lens. With choice comes responsibility. All choices bear fruit, whether sweet or bitter. It is our job to allow students to gently learn and internalize the sometimes wonderful and sometimes biting nature of responsibility. When we provide consequences for students, we are simply connecting them with the fruits of their choices, and giving them an opportunity to assess those choices.

For example, if Mark is talking to his neighbor while Mrs. Allgood is trying to explain something to the class, she can simply walk over to Mark’s desk and stand next to him. In most cases, her proximity — the consequence — reminds him that he is talking out of turn. He reassesses his choices, asking himself:

“Am I talking out of turn? Yes.
Do I want to stop talking and pay attention? Yes, I think I do.”

Mrs. Allgood’s proximity is a consequence that gets Mark to pause and reassess the choice that he is making.

To take the scenario one step further — suppose Mark continues to talk when Mrs. Allgood moves away from his desk. She realizes that the consequence of proximity is too mild, so she chooses a different one. She says Mark’s name. If that doesn’t get him to pause and make a new choice, then she quietly informs him that if he continues to talk, he will have his seat changed. If that doesn’t work, then she connects him with the next consequence in her hierarchy. This isn’t done because Mark is bad or wrong, but because Mrs. Allgood is honoring her right to teach and her students’ right to learn. As Mark quiets down, he learns about choices and
personal responsibility. And the class has a greater chance to learn content, because disruptions are kept at a minimum.

School is an essential laboratory where students can exercise the muscle of choice at a young age in a relatively safe environment. Although when compared with “real life,” consequences in school — such as changing seats or detentions — may seem artificial, they can be gentle practice for students who need to realize the value and impact of their own choices. Later, when they get “on the street,” they will be less likely to impulsively steal cars, cut work, or shirk their basic responsibilities of acquiring food, shelter, and human companionship.

When we assume the best about our students, we see consequences as a way to accelerate their growth. This orientation helps us be firm and soft simultaneously, and allows us to move quickly along the continuum of inner authority.

The Nuts and Bolts of Consequences

Now that we’ve looked at underlying assumptions about consequences, let’s get to the nitty-gritty of what to do and how to do it. This section is broken into five main parts: designing consequences, implementing consequences, documenting consequences, making changes in our management systems and extrinsic vs. intrinsic rewards.

Part I. Which consequences to choose

Consequences should be set up in a hierarchy, ranging from a simple reminder to more serious consequences, all of which should:

- Be natural and/or logical
- Provide some wiggle room for the teacher
- Be specific and concrete
Natural/Logical consequences

Consequences are natural or logical if they are appropriately attached to student behaviors. One of the best natural consequences I have ever heard was when a fourteen-year old girl kept slamming the door to her room at home. Her father warned her to stop, and when she didn’t, he removed the door from its hinges for a week! That week without privacy was a sufficient reminder to his daughter not to slam her door again! Some examples of natural classroom consequences are:

▲ When a student writes on his desk, he has to clean it and perhaps others after school
▲ When a student takes up class time with distractions, he has to spend time after class addressing the lessons he avoided
▲ When the students stay extra-focused, they earn five to ten minutes of time at the end of class to focus on topics of their choice

Natural/logical consequences allow students to easily make connections between their choices and the consequences that follow. Students can more readily internalize appropriate behavior, and more easily buy into their teacher’s management system.

Provide some wiggle room for the teacher

Many teachers are concerned about appearing fair to their students. My approach is to let them know that as the teacher, my job is to do what will most help each student learn. Period. Sometimes that differs from student to student and situation to situation. It’s our call. Therefore, allowing for a range of consequences for the same rule violations will give us the leeway to make judgment calls, while at the same time being consistent. A simple way to do this is to designate as one of our consequences, “student meets privately with teacher after class.” In that meeting
we can determine what, if anything, has to happen next. If two students break the same rule, but one student has a legitimate reason, this “leeway clause” allows us to enforce consequences for both, while differentiating between specific situations.

Leeway helps especially if we are using certain consequences for the first time and don’t want to set ourselves up for failure by “painting ourselves into a corner.” Until we have some experience under our belt, we can’t predict exactly how things will go with the consequences we choose. Incorporating leeway allows for some flexibility and responsiveness to situations as they arise. Plus, it gives us time to calm down and consider our options, rather than having to blurt out a decision that we may end up regretting later.

Further, a meeting with the teacher after class allows a student to save face during the moment of conflict. There’s time to defuse the tension, get the class on-task, and address consequences later, when the student is more likely ready to learn from the situation, rather than just complain.

Finally, when we meet with the student after class, we have the option to give him some options as to what the best consequence should be.

Be specific and concrete

Consequences, like rules, should be behavioral in nature, and clearly delineate actions that students need to take.

What are some possibilities? Every teaching situation is different. So there is no menu I can provide that will work for all teachers. What follows, however, is a simple list of some of the more generic consequences that many teachers have used successfully. Make sure that the consequences you choose mesh well with school and district policies.
Examples of Consequences:
Four Categories

Category A. reminders and warnings

Nonverbal reminders

▲ Teacher pauses.
▲ Teacher looks at the student.
▲ Teacher gives a “teacher look” to the student.
▲ Teacher turns and faces the student, with arms at her side.
▲ Teacher walks near the student.
▲ Teacher places her hand on the student’s desk.
▲ Teacher points to the work that the student is supposed to be doing.
▲ Teacher gives a nearby student a positive behavior coupon.

Verbal reminders

▲ Teacher says the name of the student, either privately or in front of the class.
▲ Teacher states the class rule aloud to the class.
▲ Teacher comments on other students who are behaving appropriately.

Nonverbal warnings

▲ Teacher looks at her timer, signaling that she is about to add time to a class consequence or remove time from a class reward.
▲ Teacher removes a post-it note or similar sticker from the student’s desk — the student starts with three, and removal of the third means a specific consequence.
▲ Teacher picks up a clipboard where she keeps track of individual student behavior.
▲ Teacher uses a prearranged hand signal to warn the student.
Verbal warnings

- Teacher tells the student — either privately or publicly — that, if he continues, a particular consequence will occur.
- Teacher says to the student “that’s one.” At “three,” the student knows that a particular consequence will occur.
- Teacher lets the class know that its group reward is in jeopardy.

Category B.

Actual consequences inside the classroom

This is one step up from warnings, in that specific and concrete student behaviors result. As above, these consequences can be communicated aloud, in a whisper, or non-verbally, as long as the procedure has been taught in advance.

- Teacher asks the student to change seats temporarily.
- Teacher asks the student to change seats permanently.
- Teacher lowers student’s class participation points.
- Student is asked to take a time-out from the activity.
- Private meeting is arranged between teacher and student, either after class, at lunch, or after school.
- Teacher gives an after-school or lunch detention to the student.
- Teacher removes a potential group reward, such as extra time at the end of class to focus on a class game or preferred activity.
- Teacher removes an individual privilege, such as time spent on the computer.
- Teacher gives a nearby student a positive behavior coupon.
- Teacher verbally appreciates other well-behaved students.
- Teacher verbally appreciates the student when she “catches him being good.”
- Teacher lets the student know that his parents will be called.
Teacher places a referral slip on the student’s desk, with the understanding that if the student behaves appropriately until class is over, he can tear up the slip. Student is asked to flip a color card on the class chart on the wall. Each student’s day starts green, and can go to yellow or red. Each color corresponds to specific rewards or consequences. Student is asked to check a box on his behavior card, and place it in the slot on the wall. This is similar to color cards, except that the behavior card has check boxes that delineate the particular infraction. A blank slot means no infractions. A white card means one infraction. A pink card means a second infraction. (For more on card systems, check this chapter’s section called “Documenting Misbehavior.”)

Category C.
When a student is removed from the classroom
This is a separate category for three reasons. First, it means that the student will lose instructional time. Second, it involves other school personnel. And third, it guarantees that the student in question will no longer be disrupting class, at least while he’s gone. It tends to have at least a temporary quieting impact on the rest of the students.

Student takes a time-out in the hall.
Student takes a time-out on the school designated time-out bench.
Student is sent to another teacher’s classroom. This is generally an underutilized consequence that can be very effective, especially if the student is sent to a classroom of students who are significantly younger or older than he is. One way to do it is to send a referral slip with the student to the other class. The receiving teacher knows that the student
is bordering on being sent to the office, and that any disruption whatsoever will get that result. It helps to give the student an assignment to work on silently in the new class.

▲ Student sent to the office for a variety of consequences, including
   ▲ Referrals
   ▲ Detentions
   ▲ Lunch detail
   ▲ Parent/guardian conferences
   ▲ Suspensions
   ▲ Expulsions

Category D.
“Behind-the-scenes” efforts

This is a key element of invisible classroom management. Mrs. Meanswell might not observe Mrs. Allgood talking privately with or about her student, but these conversations can make all the difference in the world. Personal contact with the student, his parents, counselors, and other teachers can provide the glue to make desired changes stick.

▲ Teacher talks with student privately outside of class time. Often this can take the form of a structured pep talk, although it can also be more focused on the consequences that the student is incurring and the behaviors that need to change. The combination of firm and soft in this meeting can do the trick. Getting to know the student and asking him to volunteer solutions to his behavior problems can also be quite effective. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 13, “Breaking the Cycle of Student Misbehavior.”
Teacher talks with the student’s counselor, the principal, other teachers, to gain information that may be helpful in addressing the student’s behavior and/or emotional needs.

Teacher talks with parent(s) about student’s misbehavior. When this works, it works incredibly well, as word spreads and one call affects several kids. It is often the first thing that the teacher should do when a student is beginning to show signs of being out of control.

Teacher talks with parents to commend student behavior. An underutilized strategy that often bears tremendous fruit. A variation is to call the student at home in the evening and let him know how improved his behavior is. Naturally, his parents will be informed of the call. If they don’t believe their child, then when they call the teacher to check up, it’s a golden opportunity to speak with the parents in a positive way about their child, and invite the parents to come in for a conference.

Parent conferences at school with the principal, the counselor, and other teachers, with or without the student. This classic model reflects to the student how he is behaving in all his classes and keeps the student from claiming that one particular teacher has it out for him.

Individual behavior contracts between the student and the teacher, ideally focusing on only one behavior at a time. These are described in detail in Chapter 13 “Breaking the Cycle of Student Misbehavior” on page 212.

Teacher has positive contact with the student outside of class. This could consist of simply watching him perform in a school play or soccer game.
Part 5. Extrinsic vs. intrinsic rewards

Some people think extrinsic rewards are training wheels, temporary motivators that allow students to form positive behavioral habits; once habits are learned, the rewards are discarded from the equation. Others think extrinsic rewards are crutches that rely on an external locus of control, one that disables students’ natural motivation to participate, learn, and cooperate. The end result of extrinsic rewards, so the crutch argument goes, is that before engaging in an activity, students increasingly need to know “What’s this worth?” or “Does this count?”

Many suggest that extrinsic rewards do work for the short term, but eventually lose their power to motivate. Over time, students tend to become numb to them.

Where do I stand in the argument? Somewhere in the middle. I have seen initially motivating rewards slowly lose their luster, and I’ve watched many Mrs. Allgoods who successfully use reward systems. Overall, I believe it’s ideal if teachers can motivate students intrinsically, but there are many times, especially in the beginning of their careers, when teachers need to use strategies that work right away, regardless of the long-term issues.

That old adage, “Give a person a fish and she eats for a day, but teach her to fish and she eats for a lifetime,” didn’t apply to me. When I was a new teacher, I would have starved to death while learning to fish. I needed fish immediately, so I took whatever I could get. Later on, as I became a better classroom manager, I was able to rely less and less on rewards or consequences to keep my students focused. This can often trip up Mrs. Meanswell, because she watches how Mrs. Allgood does it and tries the exact same style. But Mrs. Allgood has spent years learning and practicing how to intrinsically motivate her students.

When using rewards, I suggest that teachers be conscious of the potential long-term limitations and pitfalls. Counterbalance
them with a lot of genuine appreciation of students, as well as individual conversations with them geared toward fostering intrinsic motivation.

Further, some rewards are more natural than others. For example, if students keep class transition times to a minimum, giving them candy would be an artificial reward. Giving them time at the end of class to do their homework would be more natural — since they saved time to earn time. The more natural the incentive, the more the students are likely to internalize their motivation.

Appreciation vs. praise

The difference between appreciation and praise, as I see it, is that appreciation is genuine, whereas praise is mechanical. Praise acts like an addictive drug. Students respond to it positively at first, but then either become immune to it or need increasing doses to be affected. It works to motivate students initially, but the value of praise recedes over time.

Appreciation, on the other hand, does not fade. As teachers, if we are genuine in expressing what we appreciate about our students, then we make and reinforce a personal connection with them. Like all human beings, they are hungry for genuine personal connections. Appreciation addresses that hunger and can positively nurture our students without ever running out of steam or seeming false. It is the “gift that keeps on giving.”

There is a place in the classroom for praising students, and in the short run, it generally does work to motivate them. That “short run” may last the whole school year for some. If we are genuine, however, our students will receive a much more powerful message, and will tend to internalize an appreciation of themselves rather than a need for external compliments.