

Win students' attention for instruction, discipline

School administrators and teachers who battle daily for students' attention may be unaware of negative, nonverbal messages they send to kids. Changing their communication style and establishing a good rapport with students can make all the difference.

Key points

- Staff may be oblivious to negative, nonverbal cues they send kids.
- The right communication style, rapport with students can make all the difference.
- Discover what motivates a student. ■

Popular teachers seem to have a way of winning kids' attention, said Wes Hall, CEO of the Institute for Student Empowerment in Omaha, Neb., which helps school districts lower truancy and dropout rates. Hall works with the

department of Safe and Secure Disciplined Schools at Omaha Public Schools training teachers to use what he calls his "*Dog Whisperer* technique" to connect with students. No dogs are involved, but Hall borrowed principles canine trainers employ to pass the "sniff test" — a test a dog uses to decide whether to heed or ignore someone.

Hall explains that in many schools, staff try to gain control by invoking higher school authority and then by resorting to punitive means. But the bottom line is, you can't discipline or teach students who aren't listening to you, he said. Often, it's "that small nonverbal interaction; a certain type of smile or the way you looked at him at a particular moment — that is all the evidence a student needs to decide if you accept him or not."

Hall shared the following tips you and your staff can use to get students to tune in, keep them on task, and decrease discipline problems:

1. Subtly let kids know you're approachable. How do you stand while talking to students? Instead of towering directly in front of them to get your points across, try standing slightly to the side. Use a relaxed, open stance.

Rather than crowding or cornering students, just focus on making them feel welcome in your presence.

2. Create expectations you can fill. Are you eager to start class by explaining everything students will need to do? Instead, try laying out small promises of rewards a little at a time. Talk about how you can help a student get where he needs to go in your class. Avoid overwhelming them with long lists of requirements. Say, "I've been where you've been, but I've been where you have not been — and if you want, I'll show you how to get there," or, "Here's what you need to become a high school senior; I have that for you."

3. Always have a plan. Don't try to be cooler than you really are, and don't appear to shoot from the hip. Be prepared to go beyond mere facts in your area of expertise. Share conceptual issues, such as why what you're saying is important and how it impacts students.

4. Be consistent. A lull in self-control makes you appear uncertain and undermines class discipline. Establish a body language signal that asks kids to quiet down. For example, if a student says something funny, the whole class may erupt into laughter. If you yell at them to quiet down, kids will resent it. Instead, nonchalantly strike a pose that lets them know you expect them to calm down soon. Soon everyone will be saying, "Shh."

5. Keep expectations high. Students like to hope they'll be that one in a million who makes it to the top. Use that dream to inspire students. Determine a next plateau and urge a student to take the next step in school toward their goal. For example, give an eighth-grader a vision for transitioning to high school. "Say something like, 'Ray, next year you'll accrue credits for the first time. Do you know how many you'll need to graduate?'" Ask a high school student where he wants to go to college and what GPA he needs to get in. If his behavior falters, say, "OK, we're going to X college — so you need to do this or that now." Discover what motivates a student; use it to keep him hopeful and focused in class.

Visit Wes Hall at the Institute for Student Empowerment at www.studentemp.org. ■