**9-21-22 Keeping Disruptive Students in the Classroom**

**ADMINISTRATION & LEADERSHIP**

Keeping Disruptive Students in the Classroom

When an administrator is called in to deal with a disruptive student, the situation is serious. This is a model for helping the student calm down so they can remain in class.

By [Matthew J. Bowerman](https://www.edutopia.org/profile/matthew-j-bowerman)

April 28, 2022



Brian Stauffer / iSpot

My walkie-talkie erupts: “Mr. Bowerman, you’re needed right away in Room 23, E. Z.” I hear yelling from that classroom, and then my walkie-talkie goes silent.

I think about E. Z. (not their real initials)—their story, their needs, their pain, and I ask myself several questions: Is this student safe? Are the staff and other students safe? What led up to this moment? How can I, as the school administrator, push in, support the staff, and help the other students remain focused while we're there working? What will be needed of me in the next five minutes?

I’m on the way to the classroom; I’m reacting to the event, and so I breathe, slow down, and reflect as I move down the hall to push in, because we are pushing in. This student’s not getting bounced somewhere else; there’s too much at stake.

**DEFINING THE WORK: PUSH IN AND PULL UP**

The “push in” is an intentional effort to show up to a space when a student is in crisis; it calls for spending time with a student in the environment, to provide a buffer between a student’s fight/flight/freeze response and the perceived threat, in short, working to equitably de-escalate the situation. The goal is for the student to stay in the classroom space or to return to it as soon as it’s safe and the student is available for learning, which reinforces the concept that *even though you struggle, you still belong*.

The “pull up” follows the initial work, promoting the student’s success in recovering and returning to learning after having recentered their emotional stability. It’s a process that requires authentic face-to-face time when triggering occurs; most of the time the situation won’t be resolved immediately, and it’s not about forcing things to happen but about reinforcing learning from the incident, validating emotions and experiences, student accountability, and proactive partnerships.

The amygdala hijack: I’ve pushed in from kindergarten through 12th grade, and one thing students have in common is that once they become triggered, they move into an amygdala hijack—the brain perceives a threat, an emotional threat, and the person is unable to rationalize. They crash into freeze, flight, or fight, with unwavering conviction. They quickly shut down, look for an escape, or go fists up, ready for a battle. They need space, they need to be heard, they deserve to be understood, and it’s up to administrators, teachers, and school staff to be present in those moments and to find authentic ways to reach them and validate their emotions.

Intentional planning for prevention and intervention: The success for any trauma-sensitive, trauma-responsive work is grounded in relationships; I can’t stress this enough. Relationships not only build lives but also save them. It’s important to note that the push in and pull up go hand in hand and work together.

Your planning should anchor on a consistent, visible presence in the building, as someone who supports and celebrates students, so when a time comes that a student is in need, your entrance, your intentions and efforts, won’t be seen as something out of place.

While we plan in order to prevent and intervene, crisis and trauma can meet our students at the door every day, so we must always have in mind the whats and the whys: What happened to them? What are they feeling, and why are they feeling that way?

**HOW IT WORKS**

Remember, as an administrator being called in, you need to consider the perceptions of students and staff as you arrive. Be reflective before responding, slow down, breathe, and keep the following directives in mind.

* Pause at the door. First, read the room and check the emotional temperature, step back, and stay at the door. The first level of de-escalation is based on the relationships you’ve already formed with the student and family, which provide immeasurable opportunities to help the student.
* Establish contact with the staff, class, and the student in need; they all must know, “I’m here, I’ve got you”; it can be verbal or nonverbal. Ask to approach the student: “Is it OK if I come over there?” “I’m going to sit back here until you feel like you’re ready.”
* Validate the emotions the student is expressing: “I can see you are feeling really frustrated,” “You look upset. Is there anything you want me to know so I can help?”
* Reframe what’s happening: “You know I’m here for you to push in, but why don’t we take a walk/sit out in the hall/chill back here in the back/grab a snack and sit outside before we return to the learning.”
* Lastly, give them agency by giving them choice. Let them pick a space to sit and talk away from watching eyes, a place to start over, and work with them to restore a sense of calm and order, focusing on getting them into a safe space, repairing harm, and getting additional support if needed. You, and your team, have the chance to show them they can pull themselves up, with supports, to make the rest of the day a safe, positive one.

No single model works for every student or situation, but support and patience must match the level of need; examining student safety and well-being must always be the priority in responding to our students in any form of crisis. They deserve that.