

Episode 403: What To Do If Students Won't Do Their Work

00:00 Understanding Student Engagement Challenges

Linda Kardamis (00:00)

What do you do when students just won't do their work? That's what we're going to talk about in today's episode. Well, welcome back to the Teach for the Heart podcast, where we tackle teaching challenges from a biblical perspective. This episode is brought to you in partnership with the Herzog Foundation.

Beki Jones, one of our Teach for the Heart Plus team members and mentors, is joining us. Beki, thank you so much for being here.

Beki Jones (00:21)

Happy to be here this morning.

Linda Kardamis (00:23)

So we're talking about what to do when students won't do their work. And my goodness, we just have like a monstrous list of ideas. They're not in any particular order. so we're just kind of gonna rapid fire, give you idea, idea, idea. And what we're hoping is that you'll be able to pick out just at least a couple that are like, ooh, that's something I can add to my arsenal. That's something else that I can try. And as we were talking before, Beki and I were realizing really the ki you kind of have to start.

By with the why, because there's so many different reasons why students might not be doing their work. They might be bored and just not feel like it. They might be confused and not know what to do. They might be belligerent or refusing. There could be trauma. Like th there's so many different reasons, but at least at that base level, are they bored, confused, you know, refusing? Like like what what is going on? I think I think that's a good spot to start, right, Beki?

Beki Jones (01:16)

absolutely, because the way that you address that shifts drastically in some cases. And so knowing the why is really the key to what's the next step then?

Linda Kardamis (01:26)

Yeah, absolutely. And so w kind of our first tip is when you're s you're, you know, teaching or walking around or whatever it is and someone's not doing their work, it's good to start with the assumption that they just need some help getting going. so don't start with we're having a confrontation. Start with the assumption like maybe they're confused, maybe they don't know what to do. also, you know,

one of our team members, Ashley, who teaches English, said, you know, maybe they're thinking. Like some kids need to like, especially if they're writing, like they are they're brainstorming first.

So I like to always just start with a question like, Hey, do you need anything? Or can I help? Or like just some a very like non-confrontational question. Ashley said she'll often start with, Are you stuck or are you thinking? So just going up, addressing a student with something not at all confrontational, something that just invites them to ask a question, or sometimes you're just like, no, no, no, and then they just get going. You know, they they were just daydreaming. that I think that's a great place to start in just a a normal day to day thing.

Beki Jones (02:23)

I agree. And one of the keys, I think, in all of these beginning steps is the non-confrontation, like you mentioned, Linda, making sure that you are not creating a problem where there wasn't necessarily one. Because as humans, even if it wasn't, I'm thinking, even if it was, I'm distracted. Hey, who's a human who hasn't been distracted before? So just going up to it as like, hey, I will often wander around my room as kids are working, and I'll just lightly tap on their desk as I walk away.

I am not inviting a power struggle. I'm just reminding them, hey, you got a task here that you're not doing without even words. And so it's it's really light to start with. You don't need to assume you're gonna have a problem because sometimes when you do, you create a problem.

03:04 Identifying the Root Causes of Inaction

Linda Kardamis (03:04)

Yes,

that's very good way of phrasing it. Yeah. Assume it's not going to be a problem. Assume they just need, you know, rema a reminder or help or whatever it is to get started and go from there.

So next tip tying into that, it is though important that you in your mind and your students then also understand that there is an expectation though that we will do our work. Okay. So like just sitting there and not doing anything is like not the norm in your classroom. Okay. So

And like I said, sometimes this is a little easier said than done, but it just it starts in our mind and then it works its way out. Like, yes, we're going to work. Okay. And if I have a student that I'm having a lot of trouble with, I'm going to work with them. I'm not just gonna like, it's not just because I because that's if and sometimes kids aren't used to that. Sometimes kids come in and like, I never had to do anything before, or for whatever reason, but kind of just setting that expectation, we're we're going to. So one example of how this might like look in practice is when I give an assignment, like you said, Beki, I'm walking around the room.

I'm looking for kids that are daydreaming that haven't started yet. And I'm and I'm, you know, tapping or I'm asking, hey, do you need, do you know what to for number one? You know, I'm just, I'm getting

kids going and just kind of getting that. And that that quickly becomes the norm that, like, yeah, when it's time to work, we work. If you don't do that, it can quickly become a lot of kids just daydreaming, and that can

become the norm. So just recognizing what you accept and what it becomes acceptable. So, so be careful where you start.

Beki Jones (04:29)

Yeah, 100%. and I like how you're asking those simple questions. One of the things that I really like doing is putting it on me so that I'm not even asking the kid if they have a problem, because some kids are sensitive to that. And you know your students, you know the ones who would react to that, you know the ones who wouldn't. But how can I help? Is a question that also frames it so that it's it's not on you that you're confused or is there something I didn't explain clearly enough? Like you're putting the onus on yourself.

And so that can also help diffuse a situation where a kid might be frustrated that they're like, I just don't get it and I feel so stupid. Like that's not a very high motivation to work, but I can help support that. That is my job as the teacher. And I can do that in more and more productive ways, depending on how I phrase it, depending on how I approach the situation.

Linda Kardamis (05:14)

Yeah, exactly. And that that reminds me even sometimes, you know, as a math teacher, a lot of times kids are like, I don't know what to do. so sometimes even they might say, yeah, I'm fine. But if they're not, maybe you're just like, well, well, let's do number one together. Like you can just just say that, well, let's do the first one together and you help them through it and you know, kind of go from there. So that's really good. Next tip I have is about when kids are overwhelmed. So pret this is not necessarily some of this is whole group, some of this is individual, but recognizing, okay.

05:42 Strategies for Encouraging Participation

If

I give this to them, are they going to be overwhelmed? If you give students, and I have this happens sometime, I remember in high school, like, here's a packet, 20 pages to do today. That I mean, you're just inviting kids to be like, so thinking about it both as a whole group, what am I putting in front? you know, one of our team members, Megan, mentioned, yeah, if I give, if I, if I tell kids this project is gonna have 12 steps, sometimes they're overwhelmed before they start. Like maybe I just give them steps one and two, and then we unfold three and four as we go. So thinking about that both as a whole group.

But then sometimes you have just a particular student who they are just extra sensitive to this and they really get, you know, the the even just, you know, twelve questions on a page is just it's just too much. So for that one, there's all kinds of things you can do. You can go and cover, you know, take a

sheet of paper and cover up all but number one and two and say, why don't you just work on number one and two? I'll come back and check in a minute. You know, or or you might even cross out the bottom half and be like, I only want you to do half of this. Like that is a

really sensical modification in some cases. So just being sensitive to where there is overwhelm and looking for ways to kind of just help them get started or break it up into chunks.

Beki Jones (06:49)

And even if it's not an overwhelm issue, even if it is a defiance issue, that can be a strategy that can work. Keeping in mind, you cannot force kids to work. Like that is physically not something that you are able to do at all. And so, yes, ideally, if it's defiance, they're just gonna do all the work. But accepting that might not be something you can actually make happen, can you help scaffold this behavioral issue and make happen that they do half of it? Like,

Yes, it's not ideal, but we need to live in the reality of the now. And if they're refusing to do anything, can you approach them? Your choices, like you're still the one in charge, you're still the one giving them the option, but you're like, okay, so I need you to do this work. Do you want to do the odd numbers or do you want to do the even numbers? And so you are still presenting it as I'm in charge. I'm giving you these options.

Assuming it's going to work, again, you deal with it if it doesn't later, but you have this ability to adjust an assignment, regardless of whether it's an overwhelm or a defiance issue, in ways that move the ball forward, in ways that improve the students' responses in time, so that hopefully, again, in time, that defiance lowers and they just start getting used to, this is the expectation. And you no longer have to do that all the time and and reduce that expectation.

Linda Kardamis (08:05)

Yeah, yeah,

that's a really, really good point. And that that was one of my other points is we do have to recognize our limitations, right? you you can't like forcibly force a student to pick up their pen. So to just be wise in like what we put forward. But at the same time, we need to always be working for that, right? And one of our other team members would when we were talking about this was mentioning you also you can't make a student work hard. You might be like, you gotta do this, and then they turn in and it's not good. But so just like

08:59 Managing Expectations and Consequences

Don't get too frustrated by what you can't control. Focus on what you can control. and all that's all these things that we're that we're saying, right? Keep trying things. and we can also work on making it interesting and also not giving up, right? Recognizing like the school year is long. And so if we're working to make progress, we can get a long way over the course of a school year. So that's what you

were saying, Beki. Like maybe I maybe I do shorten this kid's assignment because I'm working to make progress.

and that's that's worth it over time. I'm still trying to get here, but recognizing I'm not gonna get there today, and that's that's okay.

Beki Jones (09:06)

Mm-hmm. Yeah. And for me, part of it is like there is obviously the very human frustration of why won't this kid just do what I tell him to? And for me, there is part where there's the amusing empathy building part with God of like, yeah, God, you do that to me a lot, don't you? Like, why won't you just do what I've asked you to do? I love you, Beki, but you could do and you're choosing not to. And so there's that reality of, yes, people in authority, God in authority over our lives, we mess up.

our students are going to mess up. And there's just having it be something that we're like, yep, okay, God. I understand you better now. I understand more the pain and the frustration that I cause you. And please help my heart change as I try to build this heart change in my students who are defying me.

Linda Kardamis (09:52)

Yeah, absolutely. And that's that's another point is we should be praying. like and there's so much to pray about with this. We can pray for wisdom, we can pray for the student who's struggling, but I also think praying for our own like demeanor, right? God, give me patience. Help me not to get frustrated, help me be able to engage the student with love, with high expectations, with with without getting frustrated at like help me interact with them the way you interact with me. You know, all of that, I think.

God loves to answer those prayers to to change our own hearts and help us help us respond the way that He would. I think that's really powerful.

Beki Jones (10:28)

Which reminds me of an idea one of our other mentors, Sarah, had where she was like, I really love addressing this by just making things so engaging and fun in the classroom that kids want to do it. Now, obviously, you have testing situations, you have situations that you can't do this for everything, but making sure that you're building in movement, making sure that you're building in fun, engaging group work where kids are like, I just want to hang out with my friends and do this assignment. That is a way to help keep kids actively engaged and doing their work because they

actually want to because this thing you created is so much fun. Again, you can't do that for everything, but what are ways you can do it? And once again, if you build that expectation and that routine of when we're in this class, we do our work, whether it's this variety of fun or this variety of you have to sit and do some independent work now, it's just helping that momentum and that expectation continue forward.

Linda Kardamis (11:17)

Yeah, and that's a really good point, right? There are times where it's good to just be like, we're sitting down, we're doing this, this, you know, paperwork. But if that's all we do, right, you know, there we can also have all these things where it's like, yeah, like you're kind of forced into doing it because you're with a partner and you're not just gonna stare at your partner, right? Or you're we're all doing this activity or what whatever it is, I think that's really good. And we have we have an article that can really help you with this. If you're like, I need some ideas, it gives you just some.

Ways to take what was a worksheet and turn it into a more engaging activity. So if you go to teach4theheart.com/ worksheets, there's a lot of really good ideas over there. one of my favorites is [quizquiztrade](http://quizquiztrade.com/). Whenever I sub, I like, and then they're like, you know, want me to review something, I pull that out. And it's just, it's just really just a fun little different way of getting kids up and moving and engaging with each other. But there's there's tons of ideas over there.

12:49 Creating an Engaging Learning Environment

So, Beki, here's something else I wanted to talk about. I do think though we need to have some type of another piece of this is well, what happens when they don't do their work, right? Like we do need to have some type of plan. students shouldn't be able to just habitually never do their work and like nothing ever happens. I mean, in a in in any given day, we might choose to let something go intentionally, but

just some examples of some things that might happen. Sometimes if students don't finish their work, they finish it for homework. In other situations, that is not a good plan, but you have to know your students in your situation and your school. sometimes a grade is affected, whether it's a participation grade or they didn't do the work, so they get a poor grade on this assignment. maybe they get incom marked incomplete, maybe you track it in some way. maybe there's communication at home. so just but just recognizing like there needs to be some type of

something, right? A student shouldn't be able to never do work habitually forever. And there's just just absolutely nothing happens. They will pick up on that. And other once I think a an a good principle to keep in in mind with classroom management is when you're dealing with something, you're not only dealing with that particular thing, but you're also sending messages to the rest of the class. So we do have to be careful that we don't send a message that like it's fine to not just

never do anything. So that so that piece needs to be kept in mind. What are your thoughts on that part?

Beki Jones (14:07)

one consequence that I've used, not regularly, thankfully I haven't needed to, but

that's been effective and motivating is kind of the opposite of the group work reality, where during the instructional time, like if you're supposed to be tracking along and we do a coach copy and I do

something and you're following along with me and filling out your worksheet and you're failing to do that, and then we're doing fun group work stuff. I've had kids where I've talked to them like, I'm sorry, you weren't doing your work in the time where we were learning about this. And so because you aren't

Prepared with the learning that you were supposed to be doing before for your independent time. Now I'm not going to have you in a group work situation where you're just going to have to have your friends re-explain it to you when you should have been paying attention the first time.

Linda Kardamis (14:46)

Yeah.

Beki Jones (14:46)

And so that's a consequence where they're like, what? Whoa? No, I was looking forward to working with my friends on this. And now there's this consequence. And so again, that can be a motivating piece where it's like, nope, sorry. Next time, remember, when we're doing this before we get to group work, you're expected to follow along.

And so using that also as that carrot of like you want to do this with your friends, but you gotta do the work to get there can be another consequence as well. I will say, in my experience, grades in elementary school as a consequence, unless you have a parent who's helping the kid care about the grades, is not a good effective consequence. Like they just they don't have the ability to understand why that matters yet.

15:24 Addressing Individual Student Needs

it's it's too far removed from their reality. So I I will say like that consequence, that doesn't mean that consequence goes away. Like it's still part of the consequence. It's just not an effective one in helping students change their behavior in my experience. Again, unless you have a parent who's really bought in

and is helping them understand why this matters for the future.

Linda Kardamis (15:42)

Yeah, that is a really interesting one. I remember when I was teaching, I would the school policy was, you know, if you don't your do your homework, you get zeros on it. But it's like I had students with like all these zeros then. And they're just i yeah, it is very interesting. I in that that's in middle school. And I think there's just some some students either aren't paying attention, don't care, or it's just too far the the consequence is too far down the line. Like maybe this matters if I have to go to summer school in the summer, but it's so far. So once again, you're not necessarily taking that away from them.

if that's what happens, then then that is what it is. But but you're right, like just counting on that might not be the best plan, depending on the age of your students for sure.

Beki Jones (16:21)

But also the

idea of like sending it home as homework might not work, but there can be you didn't do this now. And so you're gonna have to do that work during a more preferred time of the school day. And that is a consequence that is immediately felt by students. And so that can be an effective carrot that's one of those that will break the cycle. again, it can take some time and longer than we'd like for them to realize darn it, I really actually do have to do this, or this consequence keeps happening.

Whereas if you just say it's happening on one day and they're like, I don't care, whatever, and they do their work and then they leave to their preferred activity. They said they didn't care. Don't necessarily believe them. Like it sometimes it takes time for that care to sink in and them to accept, she's actually gonna do this regularly. I don't like that. I'm gonna do what I'm supposed to do.

Linda Kardamis (17:07)

Yes. Yeah, that's a really that that makes a lot of sense. Right. F thinking, well, when could I require them to do this at a time when they don't want to? that's a really that makes sense, especially in a self-contained classroom where you have more space to do that. But even in met in middle school, high school, you might say, okay, you know, every so often we're gonna have like this fun thing we do, and you have to have all your work done to participate in it. You know, something like that could be, could be motivating. I wanna share one tip that's like it's like kind of related, but just

I wanna sometimes something that happens, at least in math, is I want kids to practice, but they, you know, kids work at such different paces. So I might have a work a sh worksheet with 30 problems on it. And some kids working really hard are only gonna get six to eight problems done. And other kids are gonna finish all 30 with half the time left. And so one thing that I did just to recognize that reality is sometimes I would grade just like, you know, classwork assignments with I would pick a number that I wanted kids to have.

18:03 The Importance of Empathy and Understanding

Correct.

You know, so I might be like six correct is a hundred on this assignment. And then anything over that is like one bonus point each. So kids could get like 120 if they do all the whole thing, but I'm not like the kids that are working slower are not getting penalized by their s by being slower. So anyhow, that's and it's just a it's just a classwork assignment. So it's not, it's not vastly skewing their grades with the way I had it in my my grades. So anyhow, I'm just giving that as a creative example of also be careful.

that what we're giving is realistic for different different levels, right? I mean, if we are expecting everyone to do all thirty problems that really might not be realistic and we might just be setting kids aside like others for that overwhelm factor and all that. So

One other thing I was thinking about though is like sometimes kids are distracted, right? So I s some kids have found success some with things like they need noise canceling headphones. Some kids might need to work by themselves and not in a group. So also just kind of getting to know your students and looking out for that piece. Are they being distracted? I told before I love quiz quiz trade, but the last time I did it in subbing, I noticed

I think it was just going on a little too long. And because we I the sub left too long of a time for the I you know, you how that goes sometimes when you're subbing. Anyhow, it was going on really long. And I noticed a student who I know has probably some sensory challenges, like kind of just like withdrawing and just like sitting down. And I was like, you know what? I think this is too much, too much confusion for too long. So just kind of being aware of that aspect too, and either providing an alternative or like I said, c headphones, okay, maybe you're gonna do this now.

that's something I think to keep in mind too.

Beki Jones (19:43)

Mm-hmm. for me coming back to just that idea of figuring out why. I think that's just so important. Like you didn't just assume that they were disengaging because of defiance. It was figuring out why. Now, do we have kids who have defiance issues? Of course. I mean, that's that's part of teaching, that's part of our realities. But again, I just I I love that idea of not assuming that that's the case because when you assume it, it creates it. Just to come back to that idea.

Linda Kardamis (20:09)

Yeah. Yeah.

I love that. So we threw a lot of ideas at you. We could keep doing it, but we don't want this episode to be too long. So Beki do have any kind of final advice you want to give before we wrap this one up?

Beki Jones (20:21)

I think just that that quick prayer of like God just help me stay calm in this situation. Because especially if it turns out that yes, it is a defiance issue, that can just amp us up so much that just praying for the spirit's guidance to just keep us calm, to help us respond in a way that is respectful to our students, is making sure that our authority is clear and that we we believe that they are responsible for the things that we're telling them they have to do. We just

We really need God's guidance in that. There's some tricky things to deal with. I'm sorry. I did have one other thing if we have time. You mentioned briefly at the beginning the trauma reality. Sometimes we don't know what we don't know. for Jonathan, what came to mind for my husband, who's also a teacher, one year he had a kid who just was having an awful day, like just defiant, moody, cranky, and it was bad. And

It was like this kid was a little rough around the edges normally, but it was worse than normal. And so he had the wisdom to pull him out and be like, hey, what is going on here? And it turned out it was the anniversary of this kid's dad's death. And it was like that happened years ago. Jonathan had no idea that this was part of a story that was affecting today. And so just being able to take the time to find that out totally shifted the way he was able to interact with. And yeah, choosing not to do as much work today.

all of a sudden became completely acceptable and understandable. And so having that, again, that spirit given wisdom of just taking a moment to be like, why is this happening? Even if it is a kid who is, yeah, this is a standard maybe response, but it's just amped up a little, there might be something more. There might be something deeper that changes the story so significantly that the lack of work today is more understandable and that that's okay. And you can pour that love into them in a different way than the typical teacher accountability role.

Linda Kardamis (22:13)

Yeah. Beki that is so great. Thank you so much just for sharing that insight and for being with us here today. And I hope that these ideas are helpful for those of you guys that are listening. And I do want to tell you guys, if you have never taught checked out Teach for the Heart Plus, it is our membership where you get advice from Beki and our amazing team members regularly through coaching calls. You can submit questions anytime. We also have all of our courses like Classroom Manager 101, Hope Renewed, Reclaim Your Time. So if you're like me, and I really wish I

I could, you know, just get advice and ask my questions. That is the place to go. You can check it out at [teach4theheart.com / plus](https://teach4theheart.com/plus).

Well, this episode has been brought to you in partnership with the Herzog Foundation. All views and opinions are our own and don't necessarily affect those of the Herzog Foundation. Thank you for being with us. I look forward to speaking with you again soon. In the meantime, teacher, remember, God is at work in you and through you, and He's using you to make a difference. Keep your eyes on Him and Teach for the Heart.