

# Zone Defense System in Primary Classrooms: Eliminating Down-Time and Supporting Flexible Student Transitions

Teachers in the primary grades seek to develop within children the capacity to follow instructional routines, maintain academic engagement, and acquire basic school-readiness skills. To help them to attain student success, primary classrooms often receive additional staffing resources in the form of reduced class size or assignment of part-time or full-time teaching assistants (Finn & Pannozzo, 2004). Yet students in these settings may waste as much as a third of instructional time transitioning between activities (Casey & McWilliam, 2005). Furthermore, primary classrooms staffed with teaching assistants typically show little or no improvement in student behaviors when compared with classrooms that lack assistants (Finn & Pannozzo, 2004).

An explanation for why well-staffed primary-level classrooms do not see expected gains in student behavior and engagement may lie in how educators in those classrooms define their roles. In a traditional kindergarten, for example, staff are often assigned to manage groups of students. At any given time, the teacher and teaching assistant may work simultaneously with different groups, with each educator responsible for setting up and terminating their group activity. One negative consequence of this 'teacher-on-student' support plan is that any child with a behavior problem can temporarily stop instruction as the educator in charge of that group is forced to respond to the misbehavior. A second negative outcome is that students are idled during transitions while they wait for adults to set up the next activity--a prime time for additional behavior problems. A final concern when educators tie themselves to groups is that transitions between activities must be imposed uniformly on all students, making no allowances for children who may need longer transition times.

An alternative means for organizing staff is to link educators to specific 'zones'. In this 'zone defense system' approach (Casey & McWilliam, 2005), two (or more) educators assigned to a classroom divide up the instructional day into zones (instructional activities occurring at scheduled times in different parts of the classroom). At any point during the school day, one educator assumes the role of 'instructor' and actively teaches children within a zone. Meanwhile, the second educator takes the role of 'set-up', preparing for the next scheduled activity in another part of the room. Figure 1 provides a sample Zone Defense schedule.

Figure 1: Sample Zone Defense Schedule for Teacher and Teaching Assistant

<i>Time</i>	<i>Person A</i> Ms. Sampson, Teacher	<i>Person B</i> Ms. Stempel, Teaching Assistant
8:00-8:15	Arrival	Set Up
8:15-8:45	Set Up	Welcome Activities/Circle Time
8:45-9:15	Language	Set Up
9:15-9:45	Set Up	Math
9:45-10:15	In-Class Play	Set Up

The roles of instructor and set-up carry specific expectations. Here is a description of each role:

*Instructor.* When in the role of instructor, the educator is actively in charge of the current instructional activity. The instructor:

- greets students as they enter the new zone and helps each child to engage immediately in the current activity.
- engages in active teaching during the zone activity, providing instructional support to students.
- releases students at the end of the activity to move to the next zone activity.
- continues to support those students who need a longer transition time as they wrap up the current activity.
- cleans up and reorganizes the work space.

*Set Up.* When in the set-up role, the educator is preparing for the next activity, but is also on-call to intercept and deal with potential interruptions to instruction. The person in the set-up role:

- sets up the materials and organizes the work space for the next scheduled zone activity.
- is available pull any children from the current zone activity who are emotionally upset or misbehaving, help them to reassert behavioral control, and return them to the group.
- performs any other duty that prevents the current zone instructor from being interrupted. If a visitor enters the classroom, for example, the set-up person meets with them.
- is waiting in the new zone during the change-over between zone activities to greet students as they enter the area and to ensure that each child immediately starts the planned instructional activity.

The most important benefits of the Zone Defense System are that it reduces student down-time, prevents the interruption of instruction, and also accommodates those children who need additional time to transition from one activity to another. However, an additional potential plus is that rotating primary responsibility for different zone activities among staff members ensures that all educators linked to the classroom--general educators, special educators, , paraprofessionals-- work together as colleagues and that the talents of each will be fully employed.

## Reference

Casey, A. M., & McWilliam, R. A. (2005). Where is everybody? Organizing adults to promote child engagement. *Young Exceptional Children, 8*(2), 2-10.

Finn, J. D., & Pannozzo, G. M. (2004). Classroom organization and student behavior in kindergarten. *Journal of Educational Research, 98*(2), 79-92.

# 'Zone Defense' Schedule

Classroom: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Use this form to schedule the daily activities of up to 3 classroom educators. Coordinate the schedule so that-- for any instructional activity--at least one educator is always assigned to supervise instruction in an active zone while a second educator is assigned to set up for the next activity.

<i>Time</i>	<i>Person A</i>	<i>Person B</i>	<i>Person C</i>
7:30-7:45			
7:45-8:00			
8:00-8:15			
8:15-8:30			
8:30-8:45			
8:45-9:00			
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3:00-3:15			
3:15-3:30			
3:30-3:45			
3:45-4:00			