

Improving the Organizational Skills of Students with Learning and Attention Problems

by Elgen H. Hillman

Students with disabilities (specifically learning, attention, and behavior problems) often have difficulty with organization. Whether the students are in kindergarten or high school, they may have difficulty finding their materials or homework and need help completing tasks and organizing objects and ideas.

To help these students, teachers must teach the “how” and “why” of organization, as well as the process, and provide routine and consistency.

Prompts Help Students Have the Right Materials

To begin this process, teachers should incorporate concrete prompts and picture cues in their classroom. In elementary school, pictures of books, pencils, calculators, and other tools students need can be placed at the front of the room. This can be adapted for high school. Pictures of the materials students need for class will help them determine the supplies to get from their lockers before class starts.

In addition, colors and symbols can help students learn in which order assignments should be completed and where and when to turn in assignments. For example, teachers can establish color-coded folders for homework in each subject area. If students finish their assignment early, they place it in the appropriate folder immediately or as soon as they get to school in the morning.

Colors can also help students decide what work to complete first. Set up a simple system to cue students as to the immediacy of an assignment: Red -- do immediately, Green – homework, and Yellow – work with partner.

For these processes to work, they need repetition. Establishing a consistent routine or process for assigning and collecting class work and homework is essential.

Assignment Folders and Class Notebooks

Assignment folders and class notebooks can help students organize coursework and assignments. Assignment folders/notebooks can include sections or pockets for work “To Be Completed,” “Completed,” and a “Calendar or Assignment Log.”

One can hear teachers exclaiming, “They can’t get the notebook organized.” However, with time and effort from everyone, students can learn to keep the notebook organized. The key is daily reinforcement and assistance from everyone—teachers, student, and parents. All of the student’s teachers need to incorporate the notebook into their classes.

The notebook can also help students bring the appropriate materials to class. It should include a plastic utensils pouch or pocket file folder that holds pens, pencils, erasers, and other necessary items. Students should have subject-specific pouches for classes as well. Math might include a protractor, calculator and ruler, while English may require a dictionary and thesaurus.

Time Management

Students also need to be taught how to manage their time. They can use their assignment or class notebooks to learn this skill. When presenting work or assignments, the teacher should:

- Introduce the assignment in an organized, consistent way.
- Help students assess the time they will need to complete the assignment.
- Include a task-specific analysis of a plan to complete the assignment.
- Schedule time to complete the work.

To help students with these tasks several steps are required. First, teachers should present assignments with details, due dates, and, if necessary, color codes. Next, they should give students some class time to begin the homework. During this period, teachers should help students keep track of the time and how many problems they complete. This will help students schedule an appropriate amount of time to complete the assignment.

Teachers can also help students understand the best way to make “to do” lists in their calendar and how these lists help them complete assignments. Large assignments should be broken down into separate tasks. Students should schedule time in their assignment books to work on each task. When they have completed a task or assignment, they should check it off.

Practice What You Preach

Establishing a routine, developing appropriate student pacing, and assembling lists are organizational tools that help students and teachers. Teachers need to keep organizational strategies in mind when they plan instruction. First, teachers need to clearly establish and communicate the desired behavior or goals. Next, they should create and use daily and weekly schedules. This modeling helps students understand and appreciate time. Third, teachers should help students monitor where the class is in relation to the schedule and note what has been completed. Fourth, schedules and routines should be posted in an accessible and visible place. Finally, allow students some time at the end of class to prepare for their next class.

It bears repeating that strategies work best if they are part of the everyday routine for everyone in the class. All students can benefit from a well organized, time-managed, and orderly classroom.