Why do you think so many teachers struggle with classroom management?

Harry Wong: I think the major reason is that they think it has to do with discipline. Many teachers think classroom management means discipline. So what they do is they go into the classroom and put all their emphasis on discipline. They think classroom management is about crowd control or teaching kids to be quiet. But classroom management and discipline are two different things. The key word for classroom management is "do"—it's about how you get kids to do things in the classroom. By contrast, the key word for discipline is "behave." So with that, what you end up with is a reactive process, where the teacher teaches and then there's some misbehavior and the teacher stops and reacts to the problem. By contrast, what we teach is how to be proactive, how to come up with a plan to prevent most of the problems from occurring.

Rebecca Wong: Another reason many teachers struggle with classroom management is that they just tell students what to do rather than teaching them what to do. You need to teach the procedures you want to follow and explain why, not just expect them to do whatever you say.

Right, your approach to classroom management has an emphasis on procedures and routines. Is that grounded in research?

Harry Wong: You bet. These aren't just our ideas. We have been very much influenced by the research done on classroom management by Carolyn Evertson, who's now at Vanderbilt University, and the late Jacob Kounin. I call Kounin the father of classroom management. In the 1970s, he noted that, in determining whether a classroom runs smoothly, it's the teacher's behavior, not the students', that really counts. It's all about what the teachers do. That was big. The most important factor he talked about was momentum—when you have a classroom that has procedures and is flowing smoothly and the kids are learning.

Can you give an example of what you mean by procedures?

Harry Wong: Sure. One of the procedures we recommend is greeting students as they enter the classroom. That immediately sets up a relationship. It shows kids that you recognize them, that you care for them. Then when the student goes into the classroom, there's a procedure for bell work—on the east coast you call it a "do now." The students open an assignment and get to work. So there's no time wasted with the students waiting for the teacher to start the task. Those are just examples. You also may need procedures for how to quiet a classroom, how to have kids ask for help, how to collect and return papers, and how to manage transitions—all sorts of things that go on in the classroom. There are academic procedures as well—people never talk about them because, again, they think procedures only have to do with discipline. But you can have procedures for note-taking and how to do homework. I was big on those when I was a teacher.