

1

Things to Do Before the School Year Begins

The opening staff meeting had just ended, and Aliya walked into her classroom. It was bare. There were no supplies. She didn't know what she needed to do first, or second, or third. She knew she needed pencils and paper and basic supplies. She knew she needed to create bulletin boards. However, what she really needed was direction.*

Grade Levels

K-12

Timeline

From two weeks before school begins through the first week of school

The Issue

What do I need to do before the first day of school?

*Basic ideas in this chapter contributed by Teresa Wasinger, Pleasant Valley Middle School, Wichita, Kansas.

THE IDEA

To prepare your classroom effectively, you must complete a number of tasks, procure a number of items, and make a number of decisions. The following to-do list includes the most important areas to address early on:

- Arrange the classroom.
- Get supplies.
- Gather basic information about the school.
- Prepare for the first day.
- Organize the first week's curriculum.
- Establish procedures.

ARRANGE THE CLASSROOM

When planning the physical layout of your classroom, consider the following ideas:

- Decide on a classroom theme: Choose a major subject area your students will study during the first month of school, such as one of the following examples:
 - ✓ Number sense
 - ✓ Poetry
 - ✓ The Civil War
 - ✓ The solar system

Keep your theme in mind as you arrange the room, particularly when creating bulletin board notices, a welcome sign, and any other decorative room materials.

- Gather bulletin board materials and create bulletin boards (see Chapter 3 on how to create effective bulletin boards).
 - ✓ Ask an experienced teacher on staff, the school office manager, or secretary what bulletin board materials are available, where they are kept, and how they can be procured.
 - ✓ Visit a local teacher-resource store—it will become your home away from home your first year. You can locate over a thousand high-quality teacher stores using the Web site of the NSSEA—National School Supply and Equipment Association (www.teacherstores.com). (Save the receipts. They may be tax-deductible.)
- Decide where to post notices. Choose a prominent, easily accessible place where all students can check every day for pertinent information, such as near or on the door or at the front of the room.
- Make a classroom welcome sign.
- Arrange desks, learning centers, display tables, and student work areas. Choose an arrangement that enables you to have the most student contact within the physical restrictions of the room (see Chapter 2, “Arranging Your Classroom,” for more details).

Teacher Tool

Be sure to have on hand the following indispensable bulletin board items:

- Construction paper
- Push pins or a stapler and staples
- Border (available at educational supply stores or make your own)

Collect the following items throughout the year:

- Curricular materials, including pictures and artifacts, pertaining to themes you will teach—the Internet is a terrific resource for these materials (see Chapter 9, “The Internet as the Ultimate Teacher Resource Center”)
- Generic sayings, slogans, and information you can use anytime throughout the year (such as “Never settle for less than your best”)

GET SUPPLIES

Some supplies will be given to you; some you will have to request. There are many things you will not realize you need until you need them. The following is a list of those supplies virtually every teacher needs at some point during the school year. Most of these will be available at your school. For those you purchase, be sure to save the receipts. You may be reimbursed later in the year; if not, they may be tax-deductible. Parents can donate some of the items (for example, have each child bring in one box of tissues). You might even send home a list of needed supplies, asking parents to donate anything they can.

Table 1.1 Student and Teacher Supplies

<i>Student Work Supplies</i>	<i>Teacher Supplies</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing, drawing, and construction paper • Pencils and pens • Crayons • Paste or glue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stapler and staples • Paper clips • Rubber bands • Transparent tape • Manila folders • Marking pens (green or blue, not red; see the section in Part III on marking papers and promoting self-esteem) • Rulers • Art supplies (appropriate for projects you have in mind for the school year—get these now before your school possibly runs out) • Grade and roll book

<i>Items Students Request</i>	<i>Teacher Supplies</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Straight and safety pins • Adhesive bandages • Tissues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesson plan book • Attendance materials (check with your school administrator in charge of attendance) • Textbooks and workbooks • Boxes for storage and portfolios • USB flash drive for transferring files and information between your home and school computers

GATHER BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Every school has its own procedures. Some are explicitly told to you, some are in the faculty handbook (if provided), and some you are expected to learn on your own. In addition, every school is its own community. You need to learn whom you can approach for help and whom to avoid because they have their own agendas. Learning about school procedures and people will assist you in becoming a successful member of the school community.

Your first step is to discover who has the information about school procedures and resources. Your administrator or fellow teachers should be able to provide most of the information you need (see Chapter 23, “Ten Ways to Avoid Stress,” for more tips on seeking advice from fellow teachers). The keeper of the majority of school information, however, is the office manager or school secretary (who may also be able to put you in touch with other teachers before the school year begins). This person is critical for you to befriend and go to for assistance.

Following is a list of the minimum information you need to find out about your school:

- Emergency drills (that is, fire, earthquake, tornado, lock-down)
 - ✓ Where does your class assemble?
 - ✓ What ancillary duties may be assigned?
- Bell schedule
 - ✓ What is the time period for each class and break?
 - ✓ Are there special bell schedules for certain days?
- Lunch and recess procedures
 - ✓ Are you assigned to supervise, and if so, when, how, and where?
 - ✓ Do you need to escort your students or meet them at a special location or time?
- Pullout sessions
 - ✓ Do you need to plan for students leaving your class at regular times for such things as orchestra, chorus, special education services, or gifted activities?

- Staff handbook
 - ✓ Is there a resource to answer your questions, a written document containing at minimum the necessary information on procedures?
- Your colleagues
 - ✓ Who is the administrator responsible for your subject area or grade level and your evaluation?

Learning about school procedures and people will assist you in becoming a successful member of the school community.

- ✓ Whom can you turn to for help?
- ✓ Who is your grade-level or department chair?
- ✓ Who is your union representative?
- Discipline
 - ✓ What are your school's disciplinary procedures?
 - ✓ How does your school handle referrals?
- Support staff
 - ✓ Which nonclassroom personnel do you see for personnel questions? Student information? Supply questions?
 - ✓ Who cleans your room?
 - ✓ Who is responsible for facility maintenance?
 - ✓ What can you do to help them (such as having students put chairs up on the desks)?

Teacher Tool

Never inform students that this is your first teaching assignment.

PREPARE FOR THE FIRST DAY

When the students come into class the first day, you set the tone for the entire year—you are making a first impression. The more organized you are, the stronger the positive image you project. This is especially important in the secondary grades. (If you will be teaching a special education class, see Part V, "Students Who Have Special Needs," for additional advice on handling the first day.)

The following ideas will help you prepare for a successful first day:

- Create nametags for students.
 - ✓ Elementary and first-year middle school students feel more welcomed if you have nametags prepared for them. An alternative is having a nameplate for each student's desk (made by folding cardboard in half or into a prism shape).
- Prepare a packet of first-day materials to send home:
 - ✓ Emergency cards
 - ✓ School rules

- ✓ Bus regulations and information
 - ✓ Welcome letter to parents
 - ✓ Your classroom expectations and schedule
- Prepare a class list. Note any important information that you may need to locate or check on, such as an address or telephone number.
 - Decide on a seating plan. Assigning students in alphabetical order often helps in learning their names.
 - Review student records to locate any with special needs, such as gifted, special education, and non-English-speaking students. Identify these students in your roll book.
 - Review all individualized education plans (IEPs) and individual accommodation plans under Section 504 (504s) and note your responsibilities. If these are not readily available, see the administrator in charge of these special needs programs. Often the records have not been received from the previous school (particularly in the case of first-year middle school and high school students). If for any reason they are not accessible to you, ask when they will be and note the date. Be sure to follow up. You can also seek out last year's teachers to talk to them regarding accommodations for IEP, 504, or students with special needs (your official classroom roster should designate students in these categories). This will help you be prepared for possible problems from the first day.
 - Every day (but especially on the first day) write the daily schedule, date, your name, and classroom goals for the day on the board. Do this before students enter so they see the information as they walk in. It immediately adds to their comfort level. Many teachers also provide their students with their e-mail address (but not their phone numbers).
 - Think of a signal for gaining student attention that you will use from the first day. This *must* be grade appropriate. Typical signals are raising your hand, three claps, ringing a bell, and turning out the lights. Talk to others in your grade level for appropriate ways to signal your students.

Teacher Tool

Ask your peers for advice about what to include in your first-day materials, including how to find out such information as bus regulations and school rules. Many teachers will share what they have used, and some schools have grade-level handouts. Ask to see some "welcome" letters they have used, which you could adapt.

ORGANIZE THE FIRST WEEK'S CURRICULUM

As you are getting ready for the first day, you should also start to plan for the entire week. That first week is hectic—the more you do before the year begins, the better you will feel come that first weekend.

- Brainstorm class expectations. Begin accumulating ideas about where you want to take the students over the first few weeks, in terms of both the curriculum and class work habits and norms.
- Create lesson plans for the first week. Be prepared to be flexible as you adapt to your students' personalities and work styles and deal with unexpected school interruptions, textbooks not distributed until later in the month, and potential class and schedule changes. (See Chapter 18, "Modifying the Classroom Curriculum for Students with Special Needs," for additional information on modifying your lesson plan for students with special needs.)

Teacher Tool

Many of your colleagues can share first-week introductory lessons. You can also find a number of first-week lessons for all subjects and grades every August and September on the Teachers Helping Teachers Web site: www.pacificnet.net/~mandel.

- Duplicate materials for the first week. Be prepared. Over-prepare.
- Create some sponge activities for students to do in case of first-week interruptions. *Sponge activities* are short activities that the students can do on their own for five to fifteen minutes, such as "Create a list of things with four legs."
 - ✓ See the Web site [www.innovativeclassroom.com/Teaching_Toolbox/#Sponge Activities](http://www.innovativeclassroom.com/Teaching_Toolbox/#Sponge_Activities) for sponge activity ideas.
- Prepare files for parent correspondence, school bulletins, and substitute teachers.

You will need these files sooner than you expect to, so prepare them as soon as possible. (See the Chapter 4, "A Helpful Binder to Leave for Substitute Teachers," for details.) Include in these files various standard forms that you will need throughout the year, such as field trip permission forms.

ESTABLISH PROCEDURES

Every school culture is different; every classroom culture is different. What's normal in one school or one class may not be normal for another. Sometimes you have complete freedom to do what you want to do; sometimes entire grade levels or departments have general procedures that you are expected to follow. Ask your administrator or department chair if there are established procedures, or if you have the freedom to select your own.

The following areas are normally determined by the school, grade level, or department:

- Book distribution procedures
- Homework schedules, including days for subject assignments when there is departmentalization of homework
- Acceptable formats and procedures for written assignments (this is especially applicable to many English departments and where there is interdisciplinary team teaching)
- Classroom or school computer use

The following areas are normally determined by the classroom teacher:

- Procedures for turning in work
- Format of work (when not established by the department)
- Procedures for handing back assignments to students
- Homework standards
- Grading standards and procedures for recording grades
- Extra-credit assignments and portfolios
- Housekeeping procedures, such as cleaning up and storing supplies
- Rewards and incentives
- Communication with parents (although record keeping for this is often school-determined)
- Daily routines, including opening procedures, transition times, and independent and group work times and procedures
- Daily agenda use (such as meeting agendas)
- Motivators

What's normal in one school or one class may not be normal for another.

Class Rules

Your rules chart creates for the students the atmosphere of the classroom; unfortunately, these charts are typically composed of negative rules. These set a tone for the student, and a preconception of what your classroom may be like. The following are actual examples, including the potential student reaction:

- No hitting, pushing, fighting, or running. (The teacher thinks that we're going to act up, so we have to be told what is not acceptable before it even occurs.)
- Sit silently in your seat and raise your hand. (The teacher is the dictator, and we are being treated like little kids.)

Negative classroom rules create negative attitudes. If you need to post rules, make them positive rules that acknowledge the students' common sense. This is especially true in Grade 4 and higher, when the students have been in school a number of years and know from experience what is expected and acceptable. You might even ask for student input when creating rules. Examples of positive rules include the following:

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- Respect everyone in the room.
- Respect everything in the room.
- Respect the words (for a language arts class), numbers (for a math class), life (for a biology class), music, or art.

Subsequent classroom discussions can go into what respect means, based on that particular class, with those individual students, at that specific age. In this fashion, you can discuss all of the negative rules without having them posted in front of students' faces all year.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Be prepared. You need to anticipate, prepare, and plan for what you will need throughout the year. This includes arranging the room environment, getting supplies, discovering what information is important to know about the school and your class, preparing for the first day, organizing the first week's curriculum, understanding various school and department procedures, and establishing your own procedures and class rules.

FOR FURTHER READING ON THIS SUBJECT

- Corcoran, J. (2007). *First year teacher: Wisdom, warnings, and what I wish I'd known my first 100 days on the job*. New York: Kaplan Publishing.
- Glasgow, N. A., & Hicks, C. D. (2009). *What successful teachers do: 101 research-based classroom strategies for new and veteran teachers* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Moran, C., Stobbe, J. C., Baron, W., Miller, J., & Moir, E. (2008). *Keys to the elementary classroom: A new teacher's guide to the first month of school* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.