

Ways to Start the Year Off Right

Planning Can Make All the Difference

A little planning at the beginning of school can pay big dividends as you go through the coming school year. Getting started on the right foot can make all the difference. Here are some things to consider as you plan for the months ahead.

Build relationships

Be friendly to the school office personnel and the custodian. Get involved in school activities and school staff functions.

Give your classroom some class

Try decorating your classroom in a manner that will catch the eyes of your students and give them something to think about at the same time.

Introduce yourself

Post a biographical sketch of yourself inside your classroom and encourage others to follow suit. You never know when a student may find he or she has something in common with a teacher and is able to strike up a relationship that could be a positive learning experience.

Establish the rules

If you want classroom management to work during the year, start off by establishing class rules right at the beginning. (They probably should number no more than five.) Let the students have a role in establishing them. If they feel part of them, they will have more of a tendency to follow the rules. Rules should be written and posted in the classroom.

Get organized

Start off the year by getting your personal papers organized. You never know when you may have to produce a document related to your job. Your certification, past evaluations and professional development records are very important. Set up a good record keeping system.

Contact your FRS/Building Representative for a list of records you need to keep.

Keep tax records

During the year you may have expenditures that may be used as business deductions on your income tax. Now is the time to set aside a place for keeping tax records and to start keeping track of them. Keep your receipts and be sure to note on the receipt the exact purchase. Those used books you buy at garage sales add up!

Improve yourself

Set your sights on improving your professional ability in at least one area during the coming year. Then decide how best to go about it. Write down your plan and then share it with a friend. Incorporate it into your Personal Growth Plan.

Set a class goal

You can develop some spirit among class members if you have a project you are working toward, perhaps a holiday project to help a needy family, a class trip, or a class party at the end of the year. Start planning early in the fall to build enthusiasm.

Play the name game

One way to get everyone, including yourself, to know everyone else in the room quickly is to play the name game. The first person in row one says, "I'm John." The second person says, "That's John and I'm Mary." The third person: "That's John and Mary and I'm Susan." Continue around the room until everyone has called off everyone else's name.

Know your rights

Read or reread your contract so that you know your contractual rights. Study district policies to know other rights. When you have questions, ask your FEA Building Representative or check www.feaonline.org.

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Develop resources

Develop your own sources of information and your resource list. Know where to get help when you need it. How can you deal with the lack of instructional materials offered by the district? Keep your eyes open for free and inexpensive materials. Determine what materials you want to collect from students' homes and when you will need them. Again, be sure to check district policy on materials before asking students to bring items from home. Check out NEA's Works 4 Me on www.nea.org.

Do your best

Determine what factors may keep you from doing your job during the school year. Then figure out a way to work around them. For example: How will you work with too many students in your class? How will you deal with the wide range of student abilities? How will you deal with disruptive students?

Look for some hope

Give yourself a lift toward getting in the proper positive frame of mind by watching for something hopeful. It may be that student who comes up to you and gives you an indication he or she learned something within the first week of school. Maybe it's the child who speaks to you in the parking lot and uses your correct name!

Be realistic

Don't let your sincere concern for each child turn into a depressing experience through a fear of failure. You will not win every battle with every student. Sometimes it is months or years before our positive influence is felt.

Be prepared for special students

You may have students with special learning problems or physical challenges. Don't expect those problems to work themselves out. Plan from the beginning how you will deal with them in the best interests of the student, yourself and the rest of the class.

Think about the health of your students

Make an early determination about how you will handle students with special health problems. If you will be expected to perform health-related tasks, have you had training so that you feel comfortable with the task? Consult with your school nurse for suggestions. Contact the local or county health department for ideas. Work with the parents or guardians on a plan in case of emergency.

Don't overlook the gifted

Once you determine you have students in your class who could be considered gifted, don't delay in making arrangements to have them tested and to meet their specific abilities.

Find a shoulder

Every teacher needs a colleague to turn to for special advice or simply to unburden yourself about a special classroom challenge. If you don't have a "buddy," find one, or reach out and be a buddy to someone else.

Get parents involved

Determine how you will involve parents in your students' education during the coming year. Is there any special way to approach parent/teacher conferences? Are there any special messages you want to send home to parents? How will you deal with parents who want to help their students learn?

Communicate with parents

In your initial contact, you might want to introduce yourself and tell the parents a little about you, your background and family. Let parents know when you are available and the process and times for getting in touch with you. You will also want to include your policy on homework after checking that it is consistent with school and district policy. Does your school district or school building have regulations on how often or when parents must be contacted?

Support your association

Join your local education association for the moral support of people who understand the difficulty of your job and the valuable resources the association can provide.

Make a good impression

Give the class the impression from the beginning that you are well organized. Your students must get the feeling right off that you are prepared and know what you are doing.

Build an attitude

You have the opportunity from the first day forward to help your students determine whether school is drudgery or a serious undertaking that can have its fun moments. If you give the impression that being in class is a chore for you, that attitude will be reflected by your students.

Foster curiosity

Keep in mind that if you want your students to be curious, you have to set an atmosphere that encourages curiosity and doesn't stifle it.

Start off slowly

Go over your material slowly the first grading period so that most students can find some success while the material is not too difficult.

Set a positive tone

Send a positive note home with every student at some time during each grading period. Catch the kids being good!

Brief your students

At the high school level particularly, let your students know early exactly what you expect of them in your course. Most students will rise to the teacher's expectations.

And finally....

Keep these three qualities of good teaching in mind: be flexible, be patient and have a sense of humor.