



First Day of School

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Goals for All Grades

This chapter provides a range of ideas and tips to serve as starting points as you plan for what is arguably the most important day of school. Regardless of the grade level you teach, these key first-day goals benefit all students. On the first day of school, our goal is for every student to:

- ***Feel a sense of belonging and significance throughout the day,*** understanding that they matter and have an important place in the newly forming learning community. They'll feel safe and enjoy their first day.
- ***Start to learn classmate's names*** and begin to connect with each other. Building social connections on the first day is the first step in ensuring that students feel included in the community.
- ***Learn and practice a few key routines*** needed for a successful first day of school—and for every day that follows.
- ***Experience a sense of excitement and competence about the academic work and learning ahead.*** Starting the first day of school with engaging academics helps students stay motivated all year long.

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL




Overview for All Grades

When I prepare for the start of school, I review my class list and picture students walking through the door that first morning. Arranging tables, bookcases, and supply bins helps me envision students working on science projects, doing math activities, painting, practicing a class play, and having peer literacy conferences. Even taking plastic covers off computers and wiping shelves builds my sense of anticipation.

Along with my enthusiasm, there's anxiety mixed in as well. There's so much to do that it can feel overwhelming. So as the start of school nears, I'm always reminding myself to keep things simple and focus on what's most important:

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

— MAYA ANGELOU



All the effort we put into this day will indeed make a difference, helping children to feel safe and welcomed. And when they get home and talk about their first day with parents and other caring adults, it will be *how they felt* on this day that will shape their stories and go a long way toward ensuring their success in school this year. Did they feel that their teacher already knows them a bit? Did they enjoy talking with classmates? Were lunch and recess fun? Did they feel engaged with their learning?

Preparing for the First Day

During the summer, I have to overcome my tendency to overdo it and plan out the entire school year. So a few days before the start of school, I give myself permission to focus just on preparing for the first day.

Setting Up the Classroom

Given how excited I am about all we'll be doing together in the coming year, it's tempting to cover the walls with posters of ancient pyramids, writing workshop protocols, number lines, and grammar tips, and to pack shelves with interlocking cubes, dice, cards, games, magnifying glasses, and paints. But it's important to remember that all this isn't needed on the first day. In fact, a classroom that already looks in full swing on day one can be disorienting. A room that's tidy and inviting, with open wall space and shelves, can feel more welcoming to students.

Furniture—To set the stage for collaborative work, consider arranging tables (or clusters of desks) so students can sit in small groups. To relieve anxiety about seating on the first day, I designate seats. I also set out table-tent cards, giving each table a color name, to provide a quick way to call up students and to group and regroup them as needed (“Mia, John, Alex, and Denesia—head to the yellow table”).

Then at each table I set out crayons and colored pencils for the students' first activity: decorating name tags. Since I haven't yet introduced students to crayons or colored pencils, we use ones left over from last year. Once we've explored these materials more thoroughly, I'll add new ones to the community supply bins.

A circle area—A space where students can join in one circle makes for a safe gathering spot for class discussions, mini-lessons, and activities—where all voices are heard, all people are valued, and everyone can see and be seen. Many teachers have the class sit in a circle on the

floor; others arrange chairs in a circle. Whichever way you choose, students and adults in the circle should be able to see one another easily.

Since you'll use the circle for many purposes, keep it open in the middle but have a chart stand or whiteboard accessible for writing messages and listing ideas. In small classrooms, you may have to move furniture each time you need to create a meeting space, so one of the first class routines to practice together will be moving desks and chairs safely.

Classroom supplies—Consider keeping supplies out of reach or clearly marked as off limits until students need to use them and can explore them together, either through Guided Discovery or Interactive Modeling (see Appendix A). For example, I take materials that won't be used until later in the year, such as base ten blocks and microscopes and tuck them away in a closet or supply cabinet to keep them out of sight.

Materials that will be used early and often—but not right away—I keep in bins or on shelves. I use signs to let students know these are for use soon and to build a sense of expectancy: “Coming Attraction!” “Opening Soon!” “Under Construction!”

Classroom walls—Walls covered with all sorts of displays can lead students to feel overwhelmed, but bare walls and boards look too bleak. One way to strike a balance—displaying just enough to pique students' curiosity—is to keep most wall space or bulletin boards blank, but give them bold titles and attractive frames. The framed, open spaces serve as a sign that we'll build our classroom displays together.

Getting to Know Your Students

When teachers know their students, students sense it and feel more connected with school and more motivated to learn. Even before the first day of school, you can start getting to know your incoming students. Here are a few ideas:

- **Check in with last year's teachers**—In addition to insights into academics, they may also be able to give you a heads-up about other strengths and challenges students may have.
- **Review student records**—Report cards, test scores, reading levels, and even attendance records can give you insight into many aspects of students' school histories.

Bulletin Board Title Ideas for the First Day

- Hopes and Dreams for the Year
- Birthday Chart (for grades K–2)
- Favorite Books and Authors (for Grades 3–4)
- All About Us
- Word Wall (include a few words to start)