

Back to School

A Guide for Teachers

Introduction by Noelle Morris

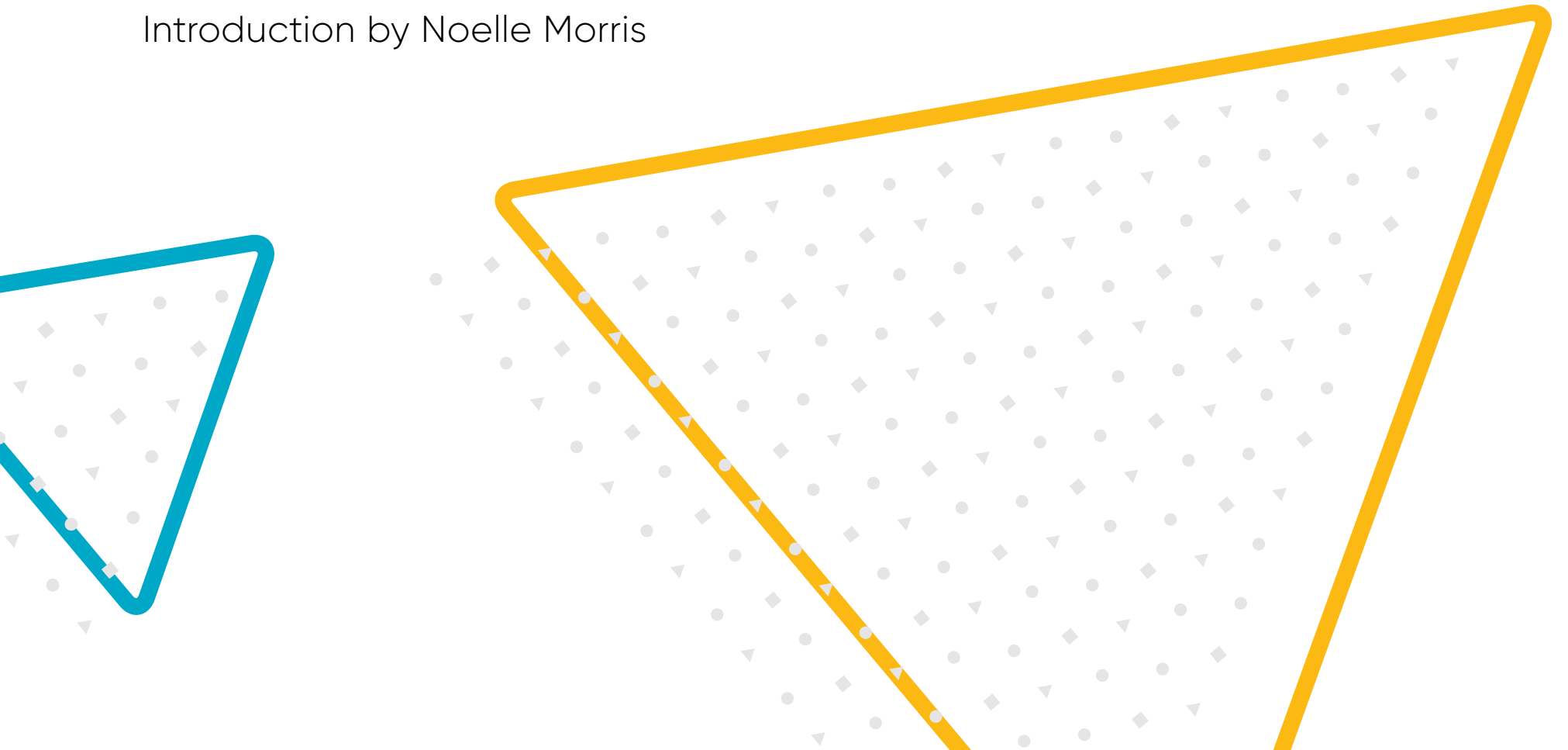




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Introduction

A Note from Noelle Morris

Dear Educators,

Virtual *everything* became a quick reality during the 2020–2021 school year. Leaders, families, and students zoomed in on every ounce of teacher-driven innovation and instructional decision making.

As we welcome this new school year, let's make a promise to remember the tiredness teachers felt, the hilarious moments when pets interrupted virtual class, filters of cats, webcam backgrounds that had us floating in space, and the iconic phrase, "You're on mute." Walk into the new year wearing a new armor of assets: **flexibility, digital agility, remembrance, and self-care empowerment.**



Flexibility

Prior to the pandemic, every teacher always planned for Scenario B in case of a surprise, such as technology not working properly or an unexpected interruption. Now we know we can tackle these challenges head on. The growth mindset of a teacher is to replace "I can't" with "Not yet, let me think." You can plan for instruction with flexibility built in and not only as a "what-if."

Digital Agility

Students entering classrooms this coming school year are tech-savvy and more familiar with digital devices than print. They pose low-level questions to their smart devices. We now understand we should leverage teacher-led instruction for the most challenging of concepts. Meanwhile, blended instruction provides the learning trials needed for individual mastery and to extend scaffolding.

Jot down how technology supports key elements of delivery, progress monitoring, practice, and accountability. List the ways it causes exhaustion. Then, define blended instruction for your classroom and keep technology working for both you and your students.

Remembrance

We all fiercely missed someone last year, and there was much loss. It was hard not walking into school or following a normal routine. Goodness, eating lunch with the same people for 180 days is a special professional lifestyle that few get the pleasure of enjoying. Teaching is a profession that is one of collective efficacy. To shift back into the mode of being around other educators, take time to reconnect. Send a random email to a colleague, meet up with your teacher BFF, and design your classrooms together wearing matching T-shirts. Share a playlist with other faculty to get pumped up or create a "welcome back" teacher greeting to perform on social media. Embrace the back-again togetherness.

Empowerment

Joy comes from knowing what's expected, understanding the purpose, and having the opportunity to be the best you. Like the research on collective efficacy, social and emotional learning (SEL) was on the rise pre-pandemic. What we discovered over the past year is that teacher SEL is just as important. Self-care is a necessity. Take out your calendar and plan your personal daily routines. Schedule breaks, mindfulness moments, and connections.

In the pages ahead, find educator insights to prep you for back-to-school—everything from setting up your classroom to building student relationships to first-day-of-school icebreakers. I wish you luck in your back-to-school journey and beyond.

Noelle Morris

Senior Director, Community Engagement, HMH



Building Strong Relationships with Students in the Fall

by Venola Mason

Associate Partner, ICLE

Below is a follow-up to [this Shaped blog post](#) published in 2019 with additional insights given the effects of COVID-19 on K–12 learning.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, last year was rough. Really, really rough. Even with vaccines being rolled out around the world, the pandemic effects continue to ripple far and wide, and we'll live for the foreseeable future within the long shadow of COVID-19. It's normal and healthy to feel and process our pain, mourn our losses, and even miss the days prior to our current chaos, knowing full well that in many ways, the world will never quite return to what we once knew. And specifically, within the world of K–12 education, the 2020–2021 school year was marked by jarring fits and starts, incredible perseverance, and downright scrappiness in the spirit of doing what's best for our kids.

Like so many others, I return often to a feeling of gratitude for the many silver linings this crisis provided, and up at the top of the list for me is something I think any educator can appreciate: **having a fresh perspective on the role of schools in the lives of children.** While we've seen social and emotional learning (SEL) gain steam in recent years both in its research base and application in schools, nothing brought the fundamental need for positive teacher–student relationships into the foreground quite like the pandemic.

During most of the last school year, I was writing a book about the interconnected influence of relationships, rigor, and relevance in creating welcoming learning environments and powerful teaching and learning. Would this book have looked different if I wrote it in 2019? Likely so.

The 2020–2021 school year was marked by jarring fits and starts, incredible perseverance, and downright scrappiness in the spirit of doing what's best for our kids.



I feel fortunate that writing a manuscript mid-pandemic could inform such pertinent content in real time. And during this process, as I reflected on my own ideas about great instruction, student learning, and related beliefs around whole-child growth, I decided to revisit a [blog post](#) I wrote pre-pandemic to see if its suggestions still resonate now, considering all that leaders, teachers, students, and families have been through. I believe that ultimately, the depth of which any new perspective really matters rests on whether it truly changes our behaviors. So as my own thinking has evolved, I think it's only right to revise accordingly.

Educating the Whole Child, Revisited

What would I have written differently? Well, the good news is that the [original five tips](#) for increasing teacher capacity around social, emotional, and academic needs of students still apply, but I think there are a few modifications and additions I'd make in light of the current K-12 landscape.

1. Make family outreach part of your practice.

Now more than ever, it's time to extend outreach beyond students to involve, inform, encourage, and support our learners' families. With parents and caregivers having stepped in as "co-teachers" in many cases to guide remote and hybrid learning, developing strong relationships with them makes it easier to understand what they need to best support their child, even if your district is returning to in-person learning this year. This will also help parents or caregivers view you as an invested partner in their child's success.

2. Rely on your tools.

Responding to the needs of every student takes time and energy. Making things up on the fly isn't efficient or sustainable, but by knowing and using the tools and strategies that work, you'll sharpen your skills, establish consistent norms and expectations, and set you and your students up to succeed.

Here's a tool to get you started—a simple and practical frame I developed for approaching positive relationships, called PAUSE & REACT.

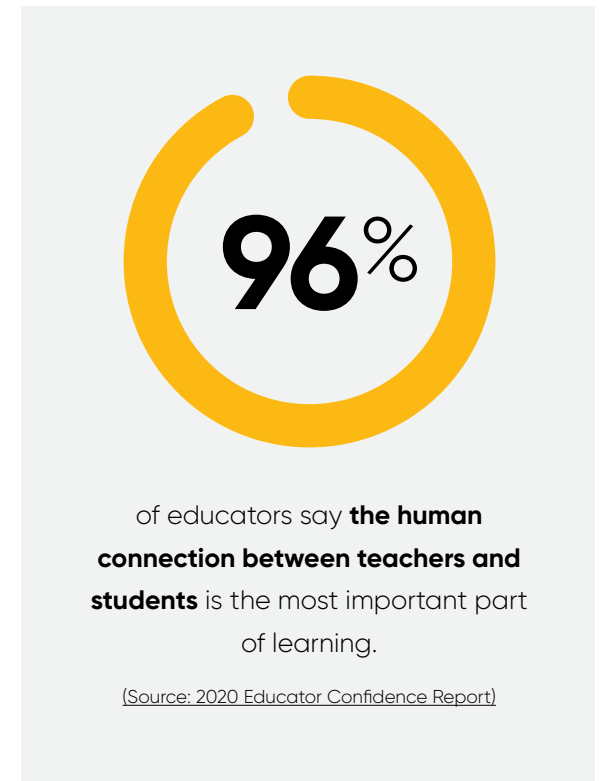
3. Consider the new needs of students.

Many students lasted throughout the previous school year without meeting their teacher or classmates in person. We will have to adapt our approach to creating a positive culture in classrooms to ensure that students feel the sense of connection that may have been lost. Consider incorporating a class slogan, monthly celebrations of students, or shared goals to help create the classroom culture you desire. These efforts will make a difference in the quality of learning environment and classroom community.

4. Tighten connections amongst students themselves.

Look for opportunities to build trust amongst students by allowing them to share their ideas in small-group settings, which can be less intimidating and build their confidence in the whole group. Also, structure activities in ways that allow students to collaborate with different sets of their peers. This will help them form the necessary social bonds for effective learning.

Building strong positive relationships will ensure students are better adjusted, have more confidence, and perform better academically after a challenging school year. Consider how to incorporate these tips into your practice to strengthen relationships with your students and have a lasting impact on their future.





Classroom Management 101: **Setting Expectations for Students**

by **Brittany Mamphey**


Dean of Students, South Elementary School

As any teacher will tell you, after the first month of summer break, the brainstorming happens. You begin searching the internet for classroom themes, décor, open-house activities, and “getting to know you” games and worksheets. You want the upcoming school year to be better than the year before. That’s truer than ever before in the 2021–2022 school year, as many students return to classrooms after a year of challenges and interrupted learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But pump the brakes. To build culture and community, you need to make sure your beginning-of-the-year activities address classroom expectations. Here are some tips to make this happen.

What Is Classroom Management?

Classroom management is a broadly used term in education. It all boils down to the variety of skills and techniques teachers use to ensure their classroom runs smoothly, without disruptive behavior from students, and builds a community in which each student has a sense of belonging. Seems simple, right? I began my career as a long-term substitute. It was an absolute disaster! There was no plan. At the end of the school year, when I was hired on a permanent basis, I took the summer to create my classroom management plan.



As any teacher will tell you, after the first month of summer break, the brainstorming happens.

Unit Zero: Culture Camp

When I was a teacher, the first two weeks of school were Culture Camp. Before I can even get to teaching my first unit, students needed to understand my rules, procedures, and expectations and be part of the classroom's culture.

Take time to get to know your students.

I am a firm believer that classroom management is not just about having the right rules but also having the right relationships. Get to know each student and family individually. What do they like to do in their free time? What motivates them? What frustrates them? And for this year in particular: What obstacles did they face during the pandemic? Are they transitioning back to a traditional classroom after learning in the remote or hybrid format in the previous school year? Understanding each student's unique circumstance in a time of crisis is important when it comes to building strong relationships.


QUICK TIP:

My first contact to parents is positive. I enjoy sending postcards featuring a student's positive behavior or academic achievement.



Create a welcoming environment.

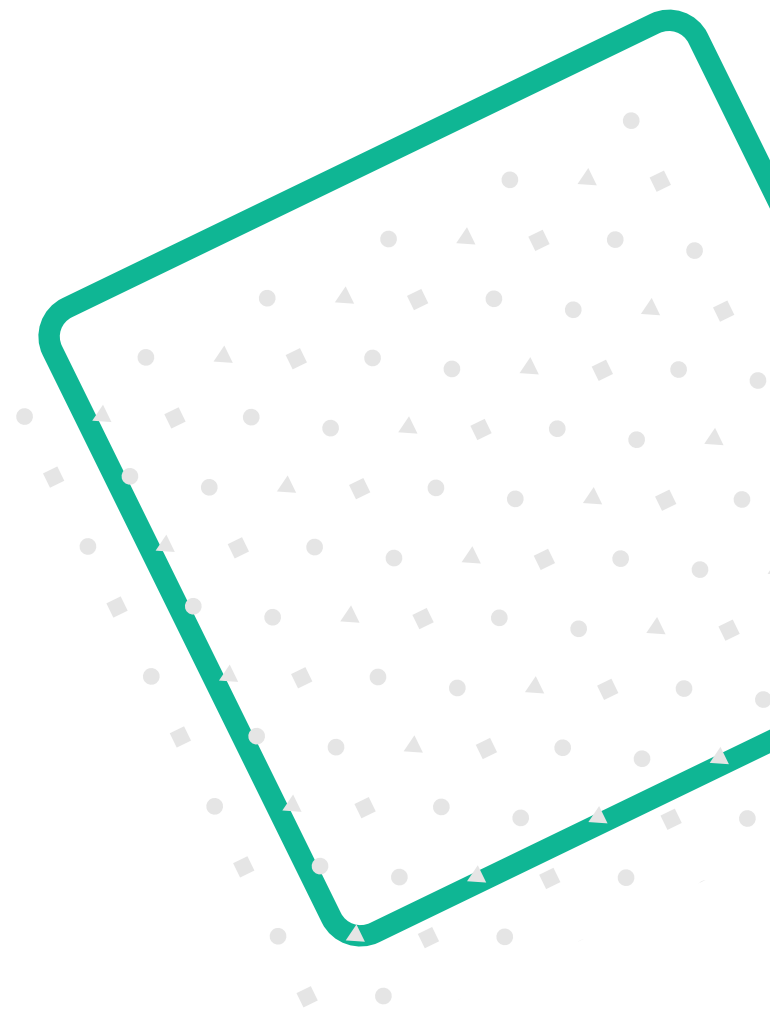
Students want to feel like they belong—that this is their classroom, and they are not just a guest passing through. How can you make students feel welcomed? How can they take ownership of the classroom? A warm classroom environment will be especially critical after a difficult previous school year!

 **QUICK TIPS:** *Instead of sitting at my desk, I stand at my classroom door in the morning, welcoming each student. Having jobs in the classroom helps students take ownership of their community and creates a greater investment. Some jobs in my classroom include:*

- **Floor manager:** *Sweeps at the end of a messy activity or the end of the day*
- **Pencil manager:** *Sharpens pencils at the end of the day*
- **Trash collector:** *Collects scraps at the end of the day or after a messy activity*

Decide what kind of structure you want in your room.

Do you want your classroom highly structured? Do students have to ask before moving about the classroom, especially given current social distancing guidelines? Do you want lower structure in your classroom, where students can sit wherever they would like? Or would you like something in the middle? This is something you need to decide well in advance of the first day of school. If you have no idea what kind of structure you would like, students will be confused and will be unable to meet your class expectations. Be sure to take COVID-19 safety guidelines into account in your planning.



Set expectations for classroom activities.

Students need to be taught about what to expect when it comes to different activities in your classroom. Independent work, partner work, self-grading, group work, and indoor recess are all activities that will take place in your classroom. Setting expectations for students on how they will perform these activities is key. What is their noise level? Body movement?

QUICK TIP:

Try using a call and response to get students' attention during an activity. Some of my favorites are:

Teacher: "Class, Class!"

Students: "Yes, Yes!"

Teacher: "Hocus Pocus!"

Students: "Everyone Focus!"

Enlist students in establishing classroom rules.

Students are more likely to buy into your expectations for the classroom if their voices are heard. Work with your students to come up with a list of classroom rules and consequences.

QUICK TIP:

Brainstorm a list of desired behaviors, rewards, and consequences with students. Once classroom rules and consequences are created, write them on chart paper and have all students sign it. Then display it in the classroom.

Practice transitions.

How will students transition from one activity to another? This seems extreme to the point of micromanaging, but it isn't and will pay off in the long run. For each transition in my classroom—lining up for lunch and recess, switching classes, getting materials out, and getting into groups for collaborative work—I asked myself: how does this sound, and what does this look like? After I have played out these scenes in my mind, I teach my students how to execute these transitions.

QUICK TIP:

Have students act it out! After setting expectations for transitions, I have my students practice. It seems silly, but it truly works and allows students to receive feedback in a low-pressure situation. They get to have fun with it as well, acting out proper and improper transitions.



Address equity vs. equality in the classroom.

This can be a huge culture builder (or ruiner)! With students who have special needs and students of different abilities, children are quick to jump to a judgment unfairly. When accommodating students through differentiation, students will see others completing different work from their own. Building an understanding of equality versus equity into your classroom culture, especially with widening learning gaps amid the pandemic, will curtail this kind of behavior. I tell students that not everything is fair, but everyone in our classroom will get what they need to succeed.

Addressing Classroom Expectations

Whether you want a high-structure or low-structure classroom, plans must be made. You should plan on how you will share your classroom expectations with students because if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. You must have a game plan before students arrive on the first day of school. Your Unit Zero should be thoroughly thought out and followed with fidelity to succeed.

So, as you relax this summer (you deserve it!), don't forget to give some thought to setting expectations in the classroom and your upcoming school year's classroom management plan. Happy teaching!

5 Tips to Set Up Your Classroom as a Novice Teacher

by Lisa Sims

Former Teacher and HMH Consultant

Now that summer is coming to a close, you—along with numerous other educators throughout the country—are probably doing a few things: enjoying your last summer days sleeping late, wrapping up vacations, shopping for supplies, and setting up your classroom for the new school year.

Each school year I loved changing up my classroom. I'd walk in, and all the furniture would be pushed to one side thanks to the cleaning crew—a fresh start and a clean room! As a new or novice teacher, all that open space can seem daunting at first, so I've come up with five tips to help you get started.

1. Take a breath and plan.

When you walk back into your classroom, set your bags down and take a minute to envision what you want your room to look like for the upcoming school year. Think about what your district requires, and think about your students. A large seating area at the carpet? Space to line up at the door? Quiet work spaces for students who need fewer distractions? Plan. It. Out. Purposeful planning will get your classroom up and running more smoothly.

Set your bags down and take a minute to envision what you want your room to look like for the upcoming school year.

2. Beautify your walls with productive, “wise” materials.

Before putting up your bulletin boards, sit in the students’ seats. Check whether you can easily see all of the boards from their seats. Make sure the boards have a purpose. Use functional materials like fabric, fadeless paper, and wrapping paper, or even frame out a board with just a border. Use materials that will last—this will save you time and money! Take my writing bulletin board, for example. I put up blue fadeless paper with a border. Then, I hot glued pushpins to clothespins, hung up the clothespins, and, yes, avoided holes in my paper because I would clip work and anchor charts instead of stapling. That board lasted for years!

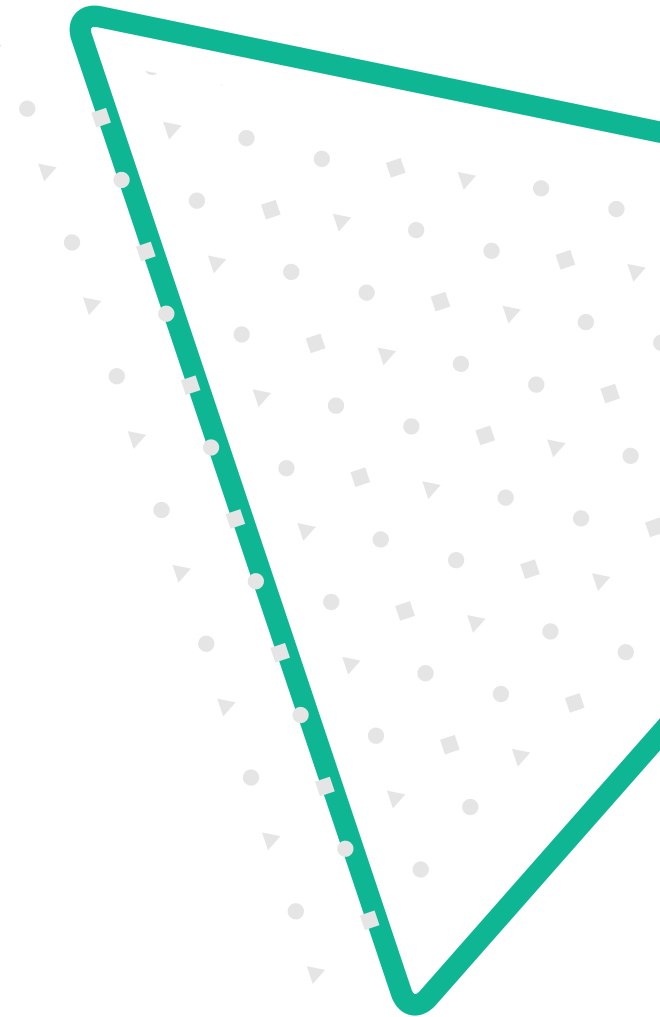
3. When organizing, ask yourself plenty of questions.

Where will you put students’ supplies? Where will their lunches go? Where is your classroom library, and is it easily accessible? Where will you work with small groups of students? Can you see the rest of the class from that workspace?

When setting up your classroom, run through the school day in your head. This helps to ensure that you’ve thought of every step. Plan out where students will turn their homework in, where math manipulatives go, and where you will put all those sweet student notes and pictures!

4. Ask yourself: is my teacher space student-friendly?

One of my favorite classroom changes I’ve done happened just a few years ago. I traded in my teacher desk for a horseshoe table. It changed my teaching life! It allowed multiple students to access me at once and saved so much space! I added a small four-bin container of office supplies underneath, kept my guided reading books under the table, and had my computer on a desk just to the right of the table. I could have up to six students sitting there and easily help them all at the same time.



5. Make it yours!

Decorate your classroom with things that make you happy. Hang up pictures with family and friends around your workspace. Use your favorite color. Show your personality with posters, stuffed animals, and fun props. It will make you happy, and students love to know more about their teacher. I love the ocean and always had a small plastic pool in my reading area with a shark stuffed animal. The special student of the week got to read with the shark in the pool!

Students may not remember the exact details of your classroom, but they will remember that you made learning fun. They will remember how your classroom made them feel.

Good luck creating an inviting classroom for students to learn and have a wonderful school year!



Tips for Greater Family Engagement

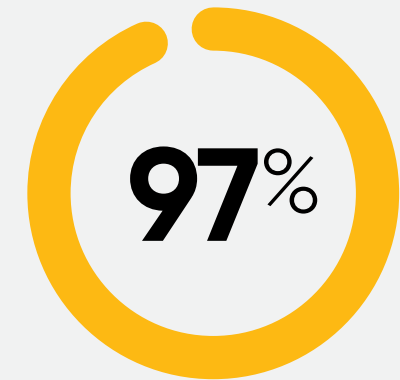
by Dr. Adam Drummond

Associate Partner, ICLE

We have just passed one of the most challenging times in educational history. The new year is before us, and we must use our past experiences and what we see coming our way to expertly plan for the next year. We know this still to be true: the success of any student is a partnership among the student, the educators, and

the family members. Now more than ever, the ways in which we connect with parents or caregivers to build that successful partnership is vital. As we move into the 2021–22 school year, let's commit to maintaining positive and open lines of communication. To make that commitment a reality, considering the following tips.

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of educators say **supporting and engaging students' families** can help ensure student success.

(Source: 2020 Educator Confidence Report)

Family Engagement Checklist

□ Communicate Absences

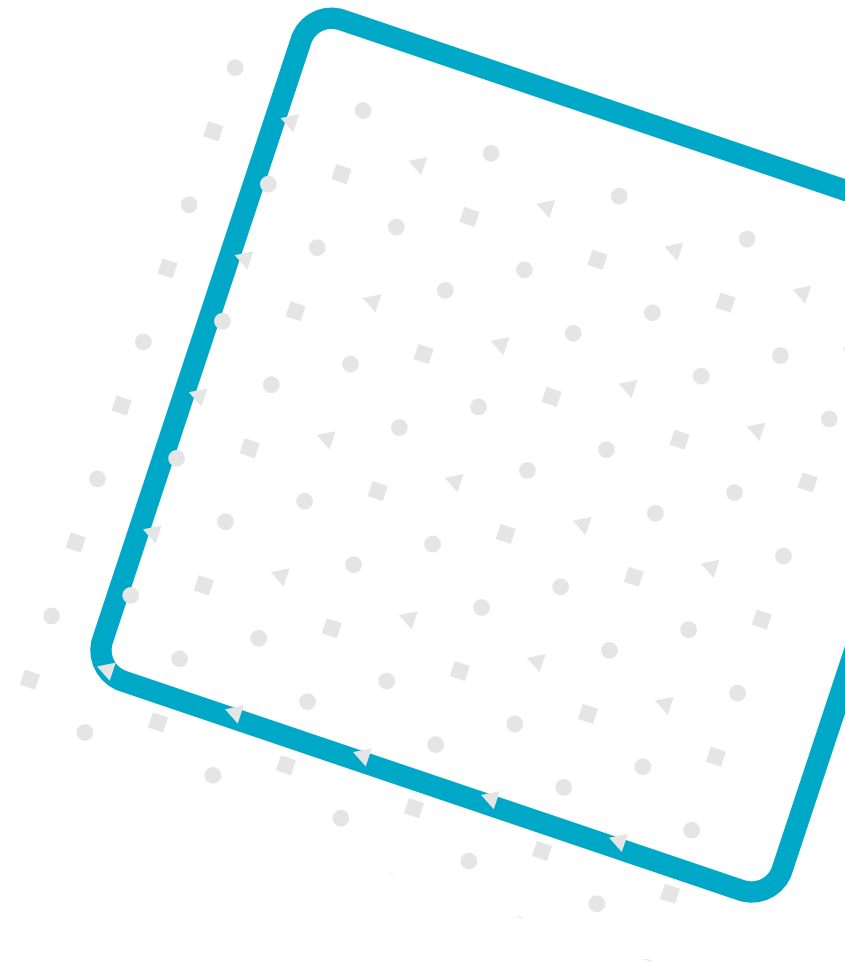
If teachers can make the first calls to families when students are absent, it can go a long way. Speaking with the child and family member on the phone (not over email) can have an impact. Then, communicating to administrators when multiple absences occur is critical. Don't wait until it's too late.

□ Amplify Outreach Tactics

Your school may be taking several steps to connect with families. Teachers can amplify the work that is already being done—you don't need to create everything from scratch. For example, if your principal is recording weekly videos with school updates, take the time to send them out to students' families. Read the results of focus group data that has been collected and determine what you can tell families about how you are using that information to enhance the learning experience.

□ Celebrate the Small Wins

Take time to celebrate the good that happens. If you have perfect attendance one day in class or all students complete an assignment on time, make sure the students know it's important. Don't celebrate for the sake of celebrating—tell them the why!



5 Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies

by Jenn Evans

Senior Product Marketing Manager, HMM

The following article contains descriptions of violence, natural disasters, and medical trauma.

When I began my career as a middle school teacher in Coral Springs, Florida, I felt well-prepared to encounter students with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. I understood that their experiences would impact their learning, just as my living in six states prior to the age of 11 had played a significant role in my learning.

However, nothing in my years at university had prepared me for how drastically some of those life experiences impacted every aspect of students' lives. The child who survived getting hit by a car while walking home from school. The child who had seen his father commit suicide. The year my team lost one of our students to a fatal brain tumor. Haitian students who had lost their entire families in an earthquake were still expected to make

adequate yearly progress. And then, of course, all students and educators just lived through a pandemic that disrupted school, ruined businesses, and hurt millions of people.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are "potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0–17 years)" (2021). ACEs can do far more than cause short-term emotional stress; they can change brain development and affect attention, decision making, and, critically, learning. Trauma-informed instruction entails strategically teaching children who have experienced ACEs.

Nothing in my years at university had prepared me for how drastically some of those life experiences impacted every aspect of students' lives.

Over the years, I developed an arsenal of trauma-informed teaching strategies to personalize with students—strategies that continued to evolve with colleagues when I transitioned out of the classroom.

I understood the urgency of those strategies on February 14, 2018. I had been out of the classroom for a few years, but I was still deeply connected with the Coral Springs community. It was social media, first, that broke the news of an active shooter at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, one of the high schools that serves Coral Springs. Glued to my phone, I repeatedly hit refresh, watching the feeds of colleagues and former students, waiting anxiously to see if any friends or children from my last group of students were among the dead while the news blared in the background.

While the CDC advises that prevention of ACEs is feasible through various tactics, what do educators do when the adverse and traumatic experiences have already occurred? How are they supposed to ensure these students are engaged in learning content and succeed on state tests? Does it always matter? Here are a few trauma-informed practices in schools that I have found helpful over the years.



Strategy 1: Prioritize Relationships Before Rigor

A positive relationship with a student can go a long way. Trauma can affect decision making or attention, so if the teacher does not first take the time to acknowledge and address that trauma, the student may be distracted and fall increasingly behind, regardless of the quality of the curriculum. Building those relationship connections in a classroom is essential, but stronger results will occur if social and emotional learning becomes a cornerstone of the whole school, district, and community.

In an article published on HMH's *Shaped*, fifth-grade ELA teacher David Jamison II discusses how he went viral both before and after COVID for mastering hundreds of individual handshakes with all of his students "with the intent of giving them a sense of value." With those handshakes, Jamison ensured every student felt significant and special. Establishing rapport with students is time consuming. But when you share their interests and encourage them to speak openly about their culture, identity, and the things that matter to them, those relationships with students can unlock future success more than any individual math or reading standard.

Strategy 2: Establish a Rapport with the Students' Community

Establishing a rapport with the students' community can help prioritize relationships over rigor. At the beginning of every year, I would call students' families to introduce myself, ensuring my first connection with a parent or caregiver was a positive experience. For many families, it was the first time they had a positive conversation with their child's teacher. We were able to establish a partnership where the primary goal was continuing the student's wellness.

Strategy 3: Build Trust with Positive Communication

Students with a traumatic life experience "may be overly defensive, anticipating adult criticism, or defiant, as a way to assert control" (Jennings 2018). These students often respond to authoritative behaviors with a fight-or-flight response. As a result, simply changing an authoritative directive into statements with more choice and control can establish trust with a student. This can be as simple as changing the directive to a student from "get a pen from my desk" to "what color pen would you like to use today, green or blue?" Or, instead of assigning one activity to assess a student's understanding of a concept, provide a menu of assignment options they can choose from to take ownership of their work and feel a sense of control in their choices.

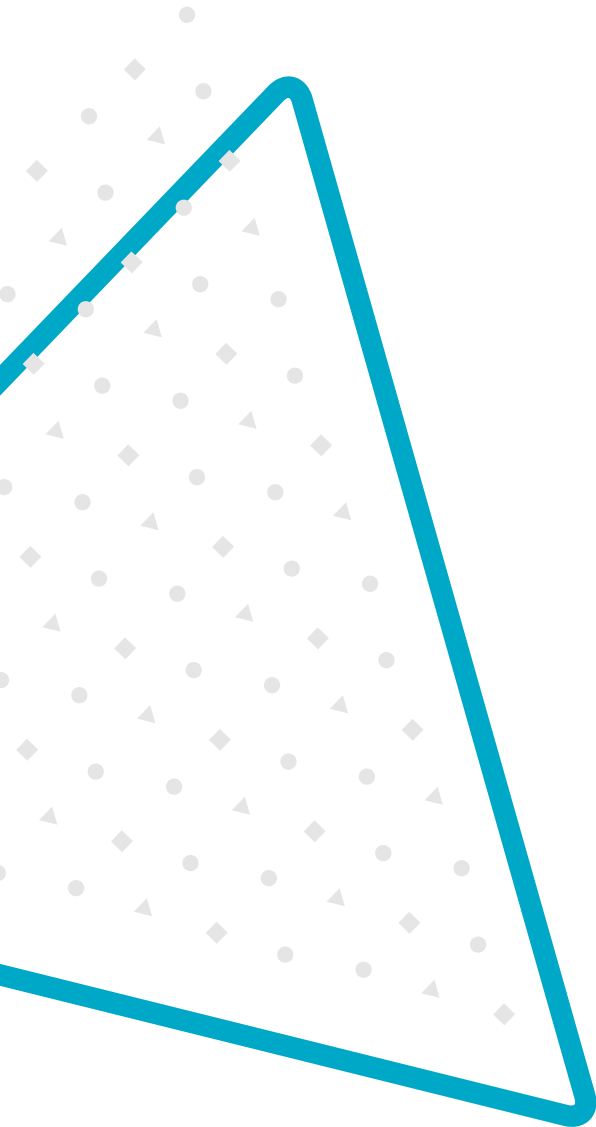


Strategy 4: Create Predictable Routines

As I experienced my own feelings of loss of control, I focused on controlling what I could—like cleaning. Predictable classroom routines can help re-establish a sense of control and predictability to students who may feel like other aspects of their lives are spiraling out of control. If you plan to change a routine at any time, preview the change and explain the reasoning.

Establishing consistent routines supports the classroom in a number of ways. It helps if students know exactly what to expect each day and what is expected of them. Having consistent routines around the transitions, or the start and end of the class, not only provides structure and predictability for students who may lack those elsewhere, but it also allows for a more smoothly functioning classroom and ultimately, more time to devote to building relationships and learning content.





Strategy 5: Use the Positive Sandwich Method

Children who have experienced trauma are more likely to experience negative thoughts or a negativity amplifier. Use the positive sandwich method (Minahan 2019) when providing negative feedback, such as (1) “I love how you used adjectives to describe the character”; (2) “You made a small grammatical error there”; (3) “Great job on your conclusion paragraph.” This reduces negative thinking and helps soften constructive feedback they may perceive as harsh. Be sure to share these positive statements with family and caregivers and in front of their peers.

The Future of Trauma-Informed Instruction

After a tense school year taking place amid a pandemic, trauma presents a crisis facing educators in the years to come. It affects children across all societal strata. If you’re a current teacher, it’s safe to say you work with students who have experienced trauma. We recognize that providing trauma-informed instruction is a difficult and ongoing process and encourage you to explore these strategies and customize them to your unique students and situation.

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Back to School, Back to Shaping Students' Lives:

A Checklist for Teachers

by Noelle Morris

Senior Director, Community Engagement, HMH

The back-to-school time of year has always been one of my favorite moments. When I was a kid, I was presented with a unique opportunity that I still remember as an adult. I remember my mother coming into my room when I was still sleeping to wake me up and ask, "Do you want to go to private school or public?" With my head still on the pillow, I exclaimed, "Public."

I have not thought too much about why I made that choice beyond the fact that I wanted what was available for all children my age and to make more friends. If you ask me anything specifically about the first day of public school, I don't recall who my teacher was or what the classroom looked like. The only two personal memories about that day are that I got to choose what kind of milk I wanted for snack (always chocolate), and I hated nap time with a passion—I wasn't good at taking naps. Not everyone can fall

asleep at will at a set time. These memories are strong because I was given the trust of my voice and experienced both the value of having choice and not.

Because I didn't think of voice and choice as best practices in my first year of teaching, that very first "back-to-school" created so much anxiety that I counted down the days from 179 to the last day. It was a painful year filled with much self-doubt, frustration, and constant searching for another job. So, starting in year two—when I had done more reading about teaching, attended professional conferences, and participated in instructional coaching—I returned to thinking about the memory of my first day as a public school student.

With time for reflection after year one of teaching and more experience behind me, I came to better understand why it's essential to *provide a space for student voice and choice*.

I was given the trust of my voice and experienced both the value of having choice and not.

Student Voice

It's critical to establish the tone and mood of your classroom upon the first student walking through the door. I believe it's also critical for everyone who enters or passes through your door to recognize the tone as well. This is a key part of your brand and classroom environment and provides the best boost to optimum impact. To plan for your intended voice or tone, consider the following questions and recommended resources and activities.

Classroom Voice and Tone Plan

Planning

- How will students see themselves welcomed, reflected, and given the opportunity for ownership?
- What and who is influencing your work and aspirations? How is it noticeable that you are a lifelong learner?
- Is the message around effort and "failure is not failing" clear?
- Is it evident that this is a prejudice-free zone?
- Do students notice that your individuality is aligned to the school mission and their personal goals?

Get-to-Know-You Activities

- Write a class *Keep _____ and Stay _____* book based on the model of the *Keep Curious and Carry a Banana* book in the *Curious George*® series.
- Create a first-two-weeks playlist.
- Present yourself and your students through selfie summaries, collage profiles, or life maps.
- Organize the making of a class documentary. Create a timeline. Review the roles in filmmaking. Encourage students to think about what role they would like to play and have them form working groups. Set specific key times of years to capture.

Read Alouds

- *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio
- "Helping" by Shel Silverstein
- *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson
- "The Rose That Grew from Concrete" by Tupac Shukar
- *The Book with No Pictures* by B. J. Novak
- *Keep Curious and Carry a Banana: Words of Wisdom from the World of Curious George* by H. A. Rey



Student Choice

As teachers, we get to make a choice each year as to how we enter the new school year. Our own energy and setup are a model for the students we will teach. Intentionally planning for student choice goes beyond allowing for independent reading book decisions. Giving students a chance to select the class mantra, decide the second class novel, and design the self-care center will demonstrate that you trust their choices and *want* to observe their learning and relevance.

An article I read a while ago about this topic that has been resurfacing on my Twitter® feed is "How to Trust Your Students" on *Edutopia*. The final reminder shared in the article that continues to stick with me is: "Remember that students who do not experience trust from their teachers are less likely to learn. . . . Fortunately, you can dial up your trust. Have a little faith" (Finley 2013).

Each year at this time, I miss having my own classroom, but I stay inspired through my teacher BFFs, the classrooms I'm invited to visit, and my professional learning network (#PLN) on Twitter. To keep myself in the game and connected to these important instructional and relationship-building days, **I created a back-to-school checklist inspired by my peers, advisors, and thought leaders.**

Welcome back to school and back to life.

Reference

Finley, T. (2013, September 13). *How to trust your students*. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/how-to-trust-your-students-todd-finley>

Fun Icebreakers for the First Day of School

by HMH Staff

Explore these icebreakers for K–12 students. They will help kids get to know their classmates and have some fun on the first day of school.

Elementary Students

Describe Yourself with Emojis

Invite K–5 students to introduce themselves using emojis. If you're teaching online, students can share information about their families, pets, hobbies, and more using emojis in the text feature. See the example to the right. No computer access? Have students design their own emojis.

Family



Favorite Food



Favorite Sport



Hobbies



Likes



Future Goal



Figure Me Out

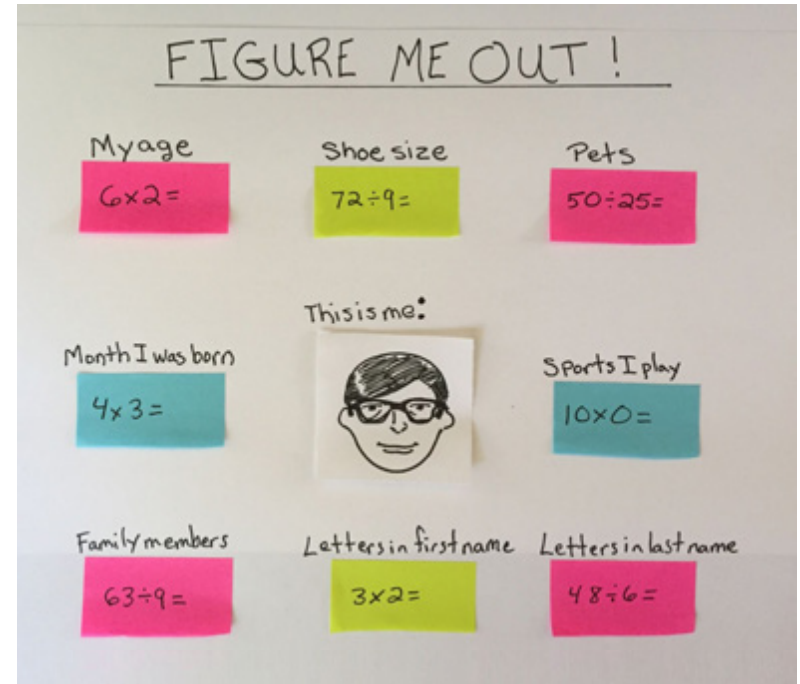
Challenge Grades 2–5 students to create equations that represent various numerical facts about themselves. For instance, a child named Azami could write the equation $35 \div 7 = \underline{\quad}$ or $3 + 2 = \underline{\quad}$ for the number of letters in her first name. Let's say Azami is 10 years old. She might write the equation $100 \div 10 = \underline{\quad}$ as the clue to her age. See the example to the right for more ideas. Classmates can solve the equations and use the clues to figure out whose stats are shown. The activity will help students get to know one another while providing you with valuable insights into their math skills.

Dear Future Me

Have Grades 3–5 students write a letter to their future selves. Use an online platform (preferably one that'll send the letters at a specific delivery date in the future). Alternatively, you can collect and save the letters yourself to send to students at a later date.

Students can complete the following prompts to start their letters:

- Life right now is _____.
- I feel _____ because _____.
- One thing I would like to improve by next year is _____.
- By next year, I hope to accomplish _____.



Middle School

Goal Setting

Turn setting goals and creating a growth mindset into one of your first activities on the first day of school! After discussing with students what a growth mindset is and how having one can help them achieve their goals, students should set specific goals for the school year. These can be academia related, such as “reading one book a month,” or more aligned to routines and practices, such as “arriving at school on time” or “keeping an organized binder.”

For this middle school icebreaker, ask students to write two goals of their choice and then list a few bullet points under each goal that show the steps they will take to achieve their goal. Once students are finished, this is an excellent opportunity to have your first conference with them to discuss what they have written. This also provides time to initially get to know your students and personally welcome them back to school.

To ensure that students keep their goals in mind throughout the year, hang up their goal-setting sheets. Make a big, round circle on bright, neon paper with a template for students to fill in their goals. Once you have had the chance to confer with your students, have them cut out their circles and hang them in an area of the room. Having your students see their goals throughout the year is a constant reminder to strive toward achieving them. (Also, all the bright paper perfectly cut into circles looks super cute as decorations in a classroom!)

Reading Picture Books

It doesn't matter how young or old your students are—every student loves a good picture book! Listening to someone reading a picture book—whether a teacher or a classmate—may bring middle school students back to the sweet days of sitting in a circle on the carpet of their elementary classrooms. Carefully selected picture books are an excellent instructional tool because they are short yet hold powerful lessons for students to think about.

Two examples of picture books to start the year with are Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* and Barbara Emmons's *Through the Cracks*. The former connects with the previous activity of establishing goals and setting a growth mindset. Using this picture book as a follow-up or the closing of a lesson may really reiterate the importance of setting goals to strive toward. *Through the Cracks* presents more of a serious lesson to be learned about students who “fall through the cracks” of school. You can use this book as an opportunity to discuss ways you can help them, what they need from you as their teacher to succeed, and the importance of communication.

Delivering a powerful message to students in a familiar way, such as a picture book, helps them receive a message more effectively. You can take this icebreaker for middle school students one step further by asking students to complete a writing task associated with the picture book you've read. Students may enjoy having an opportunity to use a journal to reflect and share their thoughts about what you just read. This is also an opportunity for you to informally assess their writing and gain initial insight into who your students are as young people.





Establishing Routines and Rituals

One of your most important tasks during the first week of school is to clarify classroom routines and rituals. Establishing rules and consequences sets the appropriate tone for your students, and it's important for students to know your expectations.

During the first week, allow your students to work in small groups to create a list of routines and rules they believe are important to student achievement. Encourage students to frame their thinking using positive growth mindset. For example, instead of students writing, "No talking when the teacher is speaking," encourage them to write, "Students will raise their hand before sharing their

thoughts." Taking out negative words like "no" reframes the rules to be more like routines students should follow.

Students enjoy working together in groups to use chart paper and colored markers for this activity. This also allows students to meet each other and start becoming familiar with working together—an expectation that needs to be set early since students will probably work together frequently. When all the groups are finished, each group shares their routines, and as a class, we establish one set list of routines to follow. Everyone in the class signs the final class poster, and it gets hung up for everyone to refer to throughout the year!

High School

Number Facts Pass

Begin this high school icebreaker by modeling it: state your name, and then name a number and one of its features—for example, “49” followed by “perfect square.” Have the first student share a different number that shares the feature (for example, 64). The next student must think of a different feature for that number (for example, “even number”), and the next student must name a different number with that feature (for example, 12). Continue passing from student to student until everyone has named both a number and a feature; they should also be introducing themselves when it’s their turn to speak.

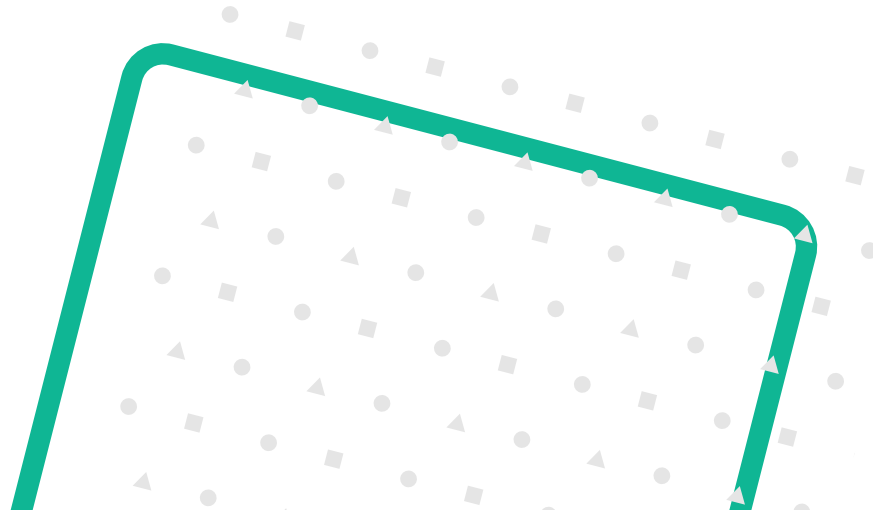
Depending on the students, consider requiring that every number be a fraction or decimal. If playing in person, students can randomly choose the next classmate who must name either a number or a fact about a number. This method can be adapted virtually by placing everyone’s name on a list and randomly generating names, one at a time.

Say It in Six

“For sale: baby shoes. Never worn.” This was author Ernest Hemingway’s answer to the challenge of writing a complete story in just six words, or so legend has it. The result is a master class in using just a few words to pack a big emotional punch. Of course, six-word stories don’t have to be sad; they just need to be succinct. They can be inspirational (“From migrant worker to NASA astronaut”); funny (“Married by Elvis, divorced by Friday”); instructive (“Look mean; be nice to everyone”); and so on.

What real-life story would your students tell in six words? Tell them they can try writing a tiny memoir that aims to be inspirational, funny, or instructive, like the examples above. They might also express a state of mind (*I feel _____*). Or they can construct a brief narrative (a sequence of events). Students who need more inspiration can find plenty of examples on the [Six-Word Memoirs®](#) website.

Once their memoirs are complete, have students read them aloud, or display them for the class to read. If classes are remote, make the memoirs available to all in a shared folder.



Emoji Charades

Host a game of emoji charades to encourage students to get to know one another. If you're teaching remotely, challenge students to text emojis representing their favorite book, movie, or TV show. Their classmates can then try to guess the title. If your classes are in person, students can draw the emojis on chart paper. If students have trouble finding emojis that hint at the titles, suggest they use emojis to represent characters, scenes, and prominent images. Here are a few examples to give you an idea of how the game works:

- 🙄 👈 👉 (*Look Both Ways*, by Jason Reynolds)
- 🍷 📺 📱 (*One Day at a Time*)
- 👸 👑 📖 (*The Princess Diaries*)

Reference

Six words gets to the point. (n.d.). Six-Word Memoirs®.
<https://www.sixwordmemoirs.com/about/>



Back-to-School Night Ideas for Teachers

by HMH Staff

Back-to-School Night is one of the most important nights of the school year for teachers. This is when you get to make an impression on parents that sends the messages: “I will do a great job educating your child,” “You can trust me with your scholar,” and “We are partners in your child’s academic success.”

These messages, which parents want to hear, should reassure them that their child is being well taken care of and getting an excellent education. To do this, you will need

to plan thoroughly for the long-awaited Back-to-School Night. Typically, a picture-perfect classroom for this big night is a mix of a clean student-centered spaces with engaging parent activities and information presented in a fun and clear manner.

Whether your Back-to-School Night is in person or virtual, here are some ideas that can be adapted for the online format and that can help you plan successful and memorable experiences for parents.

This is when you get to make an impression on parents that sends the [message]: “I will do a great job educating your child.”



Teacher Cards

For Back-to-School Night, you can create *teacher cards*. These basically have the look, shape, and format of traditional business cards but with a twist for teachers. You can list your name, classroom number, and contact information such as email, school phone number, and any apps or websites you use for instruction. On the back of the card, list the times and hours you are available for tutoring, extra help, or parent conferences. These cards can be colorful and engaging, and make your information easy and quick to hand out to parents during the sometimes madness of Back-to-School Night. The twist for teachers? You can put magnets on the back of each card so that parents can place it on their refrigerator for easier access!

This is a step in the direction of building relationships with parents and guardians of the students you're teaching. When families and teachers are on the same team and in constant touch, student achievement is extra likely. One more tip: make sure to use cardstock paper for your cards so that they are durable and hardy. And to ensure your teacher cards last all school year? Laminate them! If some of your students' parents or families are joining Back-to-School Night remotely, you can mail these teacher cards home or give them to the students the following day in class.

Positive Family Notes

These notes are written by family members or parents for their student with motivating, positive, and encouraging words. Instead of using loose-leaf paper, consider making several copies of letter templates ahead of time with fun patterns, pictures, and designs on which family members and parents can write a note. Doing this makes them more special for both the family member and the student.

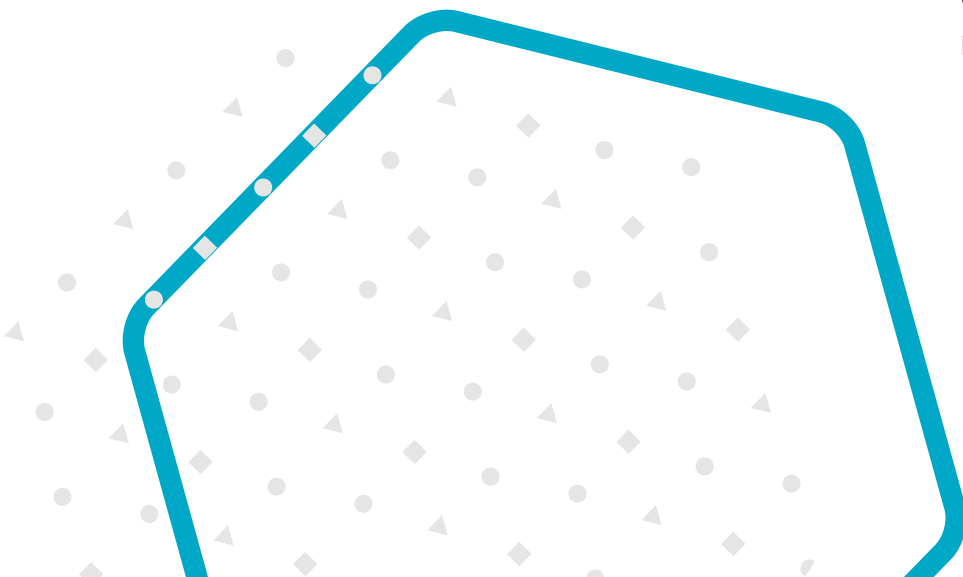
Family members can write as many notes as they'd like for their student, which you can collect and keep at your desk. The best part of this Back-to-School Night activity is that these notes are unknown to students! Students will have no idea that you assigned this little project to their family members. You can hand these notes to students throughout the school year when they seem to be having a challenging day. No matter the age of a student, there are times when a student just needs some reassurance.

"On a Trip" Brochure

Learning is an adventure. A school year is a journey. This means you need to share the trip you have planned for the students with their parents and family members. Just like a brochure would sell a destination trip to a customer, you need to "sell" the fun, engaging, and adventurous school year you have planned.

Highlight the themes and learning goals planned for each marking period as well as the major projects, benchmark assessments, and milestones. This way, parents and family members know what to expect, what to keep an eye out for, and when to jump in and help their kids on upcoming projects and tests! Another very important purpose of this brochure is to list the online resources that you plan to use throughout the year and are available to students. This may include online textbook information, classroom login information for apps, and any platforms that will be used for instruction. Also include the website addresses and any usernames or passwords where students will need to log in.

If some parents or families are joining Back-to-School Night virtually, email your brochure to them soon afterwards. Even those joining in person will appreciate a digital version!





“You Should Know . . .” Form

You can end the night by giving family members the opportunity to provide more insight into their children through a “You Should Know . . .” form. This form allows the family members to share aspects about their children’s learning, personality, habits, and routines, which are helpful to you—as their teacher—to know. The form can say things like:


- You should know my child likes to learn _____. (*in groups, independently, in pairs*)
- You should know my child like to read _____ genre of books. (*fiction, adventure, mystery*)
- You should know that my child struggles with _____. (*comprehension, sentence structure, multiplication*)
- You should know that after school, my child _____. (*comes home, plays sports, goes to tutoring*)

You can create the “You Should Know . . .” form to fit the grade and subject of your classroom, and this can be distributed to parents and caregivers in person or sent out remotely. Family members really enjoy talking about their shining star, and this activity provides an efficient way to do that while offering valuable insight on the students sitting in your classroom.

BONUS DOWNLOAD: Back-to-School Poem

By Patricia Starek

As you read the poet share her “why,” it will be natural to ask yourself the same guided questions. The downloadable, multipage classroom visual is sized at 8.5x11 inches. Piece it together and hang it up in your in-person or virtual classroom!

 BACK TO SCHOOL PATRICIA STAREK Why do I come back? many mornings sleep ends too soon anxiety marries procrastination bed looks to good like Canaan Why do my feet touch the cold floor? You seven-year-old you tell me that you love me we wrestle with words you resist their code Find 5,000 things to focus in besides the solid maddening letters in front of you and slowly and slowly they untangle and then quietly and then loudly you proclaim I love you I love you I love you				
1	2	3	4	nhco.com

About the Authors

Noelle Morris

Senior Director, Community Engagement, HMH

Noelle started her career in education as a middle school language arts and science teacher. Next, she became involved with the Orange County Literacy Project and has since contributed to the development of HMH's *Read 180* and other intervention programs. She has written several nonfiction books as well as professional learning educational materials. Today Noelle develops content, events, and community experiences for online professional learning at HMH.

Venola Mason

Associate Partner, ICLE

Venola is passionate about creating practicable solutions to increase student achievement using data and support implementation efforts. As a teacher for five years, she led her students to consistently make one to three years of academic growth across all content areas. She also served as a site manager and central site manager for The New Teacher Project (TNTP).

Brittany Mamphey

Dean of Students, South Elementary School

Brittany is a dean of students at South Elementary School in the Mt. Healthy City Schools in Ohio. Previously she taught fourth- and fifth-grade reading, language arts, and social studies. She is a 2012 graduate of Bowling Green State University and completed her master's degrees at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio) and the University of Cincinnati. As of 2020, she is a member of her local school board.

Lisa Sims

Former Teacher and HMH Consultant

Lisa Sims is a graduate of the University of North Texas. She has her bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in early childhood education. She worked in education as a first-grade teacher in the Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District for 16 years and served as the team leader for 11 of those years. In 2018, Lisa began teaching students English online through VIPKid. She was an HMH consultant in 2019.

Dr. Adam Drummond

Associate Partner, ICLE

Adam has served as a consultant, manager, director, and keynoter for the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE). His mantra—100 percent of the students, 100 percent of the time—offers the opportunity to engage teachers and leaders in helping them build their own leadership capacity and skill set to ensure all students receive the very best education possible every single day.

Jenn Evans

Senior Product Marketing Manager for Supplemental & Intervention Solutions, HMH

Prior to her work with HMH, Evans served as a middle school teacher in Broward County, Florida, and after-school tutor in Texas before working at a range of learning companies, including Pearson and Learning A-Z. She graduated from the University of Central Florida with a degree in English language arts education and volunteers with local animal rescues in her area during her spare time.

The views expressed in this guide are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of HMH.



Back to School

A Guide for Teachers

Recover from the most challenging year in education by implementing leading intervention solutions that can help students gain up to two years of growth in one year.*

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*Based on HMH-conducted and independent studies. When districts follow research-based implementation guidelines, they achieve the best results.



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