

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Pull together any group of first-year teachers and ask them their number one challenge in the classroom. Chances are, you'll find classroom management or maintaining an orderly class at the top of the list.

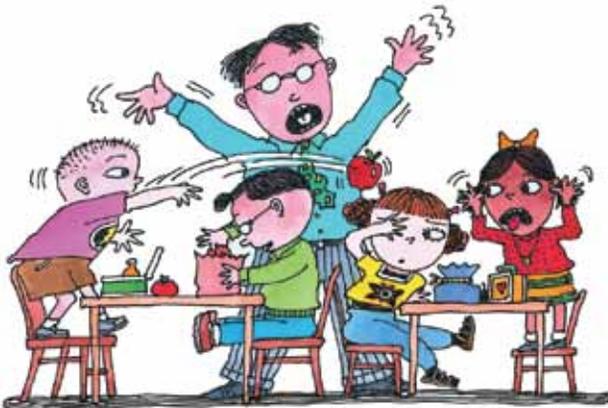
Without an orderly and efficient classroom, you're not going to be able to get students to experience those 'Aha' moments that drew you into teaching in the first place.

Or, one student may experience a breakthrough, but 24 others missed the point because of too many distractions. And you'll lose valuable instructional time. According to a review of research by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, almost one-half of instructional time in a typical classroom is lost to disciplinary infractions and repercussions. Another study found that many classrooms lost five to 15 minutes of instructional class time at the beginning of every period because of poor or non-existent start-up routines.

As a new teacher, your first responsibility is to learn and enforce your school or district code of discipline. So make sure to consult your handbook to find out what guidelines you're provided with, and ask a colleague or your supervisor if you have questions. Some schools participate in formal schoolwide discipline programs; if your school does, make sure you get materials as soon as possible and that your school or division provides you appropriate training.

In most cases, developing the specifics of your classroom management plan will fall on you. You probably received some training in classroom management in your preparation program, but to be successful your first year you're going to need a plan of attack and the ability to adjust on the fly.

Veteran teachers say that being a successful classroom manager requires mastering the three Rs: rules, routines, and reinforcement.



Rules

Students need clear expectations, and good rules help them understand which behaviors are acceptable or forbidden.

If you have too many rules, or they're not easily understood, you're headed for discipline problems. **According to the National Education Association's "I Can Do It" training module, whether you prepare rules yourself or involve students in setting class rules, make sure to:**

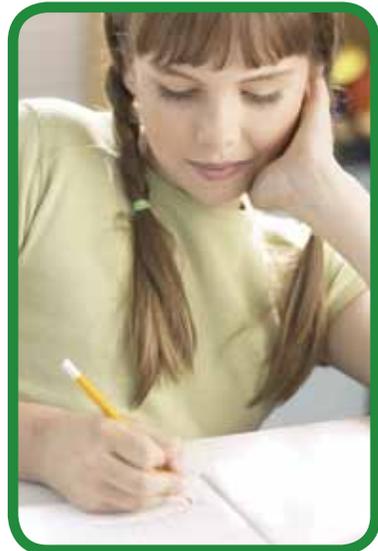
- > State them in a positive fashion
- > Ensure that they are age-appropriate and use kid-friendly language
- > Post the rules prominently
- > Have students discuss the rules and rehearse them the first week of school, and have a rules "refresher" as necessary.

Routines

If you visit an orderly classroom, you may be amazed how efficient it is. Students begin working the moment they find their seats, while the teacher takes roll. Homework helpers collect papers and place them in a box on the teacher's desk. A student who returns to school after being absent consults a "learning log" notebook to copy down a missed assignment, instead of loudly demanding, "Did we do anything yesterday?" And so on.

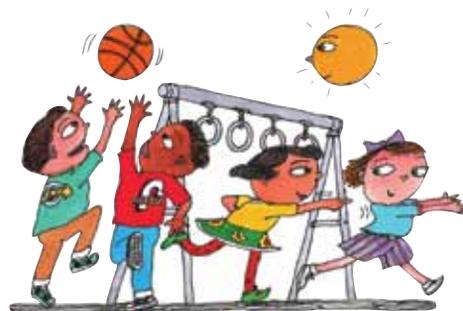
Chances are, the teacher in such a classroom has carefully mapped out and taught her students how they'll manage a host of routine tasks to get their work done together.

You should begin identifying how to handle routines before school begins, and be prepared to begin teaching students your classroom routines the very first day. Some of them—such as fire drills or procedures for using the media center—may be dictated by the school. Plan to develop most of them yourself, and ask a colleague or mentor for suggestions.



The NEA's *Discipline Checklist* suggests some common routines you should establish and teach to students, as appropriate:

- > how to enter and leave the classroom
- > where to store belongings in the classroom
- > how materials such as class papers will be distributed and collected
- > what to do when a student needs to use the bathroom, get a drink of water, or sharpen a pencil
- > how the roll and lunch counts will be taken
- > how you'll signal the class for attention (such as flicking the light switch on and off or raising your hand)
- > how students should enter and leave the playground, and what expectations you have for their play
- > what students who miss school should do upon their return.



Cool It Down

No matter how well you design your classroom management plan, and how hard you try to reward positive behavior and apply rules fairly, kids are still going to test you. And, occasionally, a student's behavior can trigger a major confrontation.

Obviously, certain problems require an immediate, serious response. For example, if a student purposefully breaks classroom equipment, hits another student, or directs a stream of profane comments at you, that student must be removed from class and sent to the administrative offices immediately.

More commonly, a student will cause a problem, with you or a classmate, and even though you run through your usual responses of reminders and application of consequences, the behavior continues. What next?

Some good suggestions, drawn from the NEA's *But High School Teaching is Different!*:

- > Try to keep things calm. Lower your voice instead of raising it. Increasing the volume escalates the problem.
- > Consider giving students a chance to save face. For

example, if a student keeps exclaiming that he hates school, offer that student the chance to write out his feelings for 10 minutes before resuming his classwork.

- > Give a last option or choice. For example, the student must choose to follow the group work rules or accept a detention.
- > Approach the offender as privately as possible. Ask the student to stand in the hallway and wait for you. Wait a few minutes and discipline in private. Remind the student that he's broken class rules or norms, and that he needs to accept them and cease the conduct to be allowed back in.

A reminder: make sure you know your school violence prevention guidelines, if any, and apply them as appropriate.

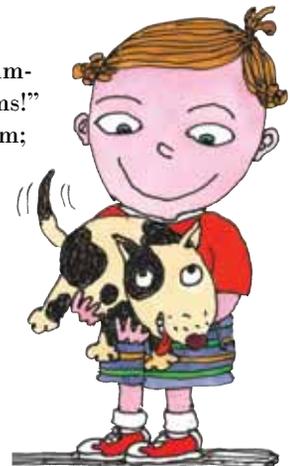
HOMEWORK

“I didn't know we were supposed to do all the odd-numbered problems—I did all the even-numbered problems!”
“I did my homework, but I left it in Ms. Martin's room; want me to go get it?” “My dog ate it.”

Homework provokes so many headaches that some teachers are assigning it less and less. But homework complements direct instruction in the classroom and gives kids extra time to hone their skills. It provides valuable reinforcement for in-class activities.

Follow these tips to avoid homework hassles:

- > Explain the purpose of every homework assignment.
- > Don't give homework as punishment.
- > Don't give spur-of-the-moment homework assignments.
- > Don't assume that because no questions are asked when you give the assignments that there are no questions. Ask one or two students to repeat or paraphrase the assignment.
- > Consult school or district policy and ask fellow teachers at your grade level how much homework seems appropriate. About 10-20 minutes of daily homework, on average, is about right for students in grades K-2. Pupils in grades 3-6 can probably handle about 30-60 minutes of homework a day. Averages don't readily apply to older students, since they're handling both daily and long-term assignments in multiple classes.



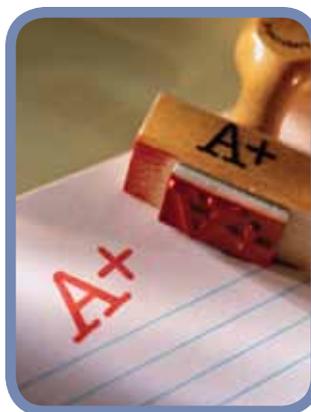
- > Don't expect students (even your top achievers) to always have their homework done. Kids are human.
- > Understand that not all kinds of homework assignments are equally valuable for all students.
- > Acknowledge and be thankful for students' effort to complete homework.
- > Listen to what students say about their experiences with homework.
- > Encourage students to involve their parents in their homework. Keep in mind that many parents may not have the skills to help out but would like to know what their child is learning.
- > Don't confuse excuses for incomplete homework assignments with legitimate reasons. Be firm but flexible.
- > Make every effort to acknowledge completed homework assignments. Give credit for completion rather than grades. Have students grade their own homework whenever appropriate to maximize learning.

GRADING

"What grade did you give me?" "How come I'm getting a 'C' when I did all my homework?" "Can't you grade on the curve?"

Grades cause more consternation among students and parents alike than almost any other aspect of teaching. So you'll need to make sure your grading plan and procedures are sound. **Some tips:**

- > Begin by consulting any school policies. Your school may have a grading scale you're required to use. Check with your supervisor or with your department head if you're a secondary school teacher.
- > Determine how you'll rank various types of student work. How much will quizzes, mid-terms or final exams, homework, and class participation count toward your final average? One technique is to assign percentages of the overall mark to each component. Another is to determine a total number of points for the components and determine how many points net a student an A, B, and so on.



- > Use numerical grades for assignments, and show students how many points they received and how many were possible (e.g., $22/25 = 88\%$). Numbers can be converted to letter grades at reporting time.
- > Think twice before allowing “extra credit” assignments at the end of the marking period to raise the grade of students who failed to complete required assignments. Doing so sends the message that your “required” work is actually optional. Extra credit assignments should be open to all students.
- > Make sure your students, and their parents, understand your grading policies. Get help from a colleague or mentor if you’re being pressured to change a grade, and inform your VEA-NEA UniServ Director. Also, keep the school counselor in the loop if you see a student’s grades drop precipitously or if you have a student headed toward a failing grade.

WORKING WITH PARENTS

Next to classroom management, establishing smooth relations with parents may be the toughest challenge for the new teacher. Ideally, parents can be a strong ally—reinforcing your curriculum and behavioral expectations at home. In today’s fast-paced and stressful environment, though, many teachers say that some parents have become invisible or, in some cases, hinder their efforts.

Some ideas for maximizing parental support:

- > Make time to regularly communicate with parents and guardians of your students, and be sure to open those lines of communication early in the school year. Some teachers visit students’ homes early on. Try at least to make a call home within the first few weeks.
- > Ask parents about their child’s strengths and weaknesses. They’ll be glad you asked, and the information they share can give you a head start in providing for that student. And let them know when and where they can reach you, providing a phone number and/or e-mail address as appropriate.
- > Keep parents informed about your curriculum, especially projects that require special materials from home or the crafts store. Some teachers do this through regular, informal newsletters or on a classroom website.
- > Invite parents to visit or to volunteer, as appropriate. (Make sure to consult your school or district policies first.) Parent-volunteers can help you with administra-

tive tasks, work with small reading or task groups, or perform other duties. Familiarity tends to breed mutual respect and support.

Successful Conferences

Within your first couple of months on the job, you'll lead your first round of parent-teacher conferences.

Some tips for making the conferences run smoothly:

- > Prepare your records and samples of student work for each appointment and be ready to find them quickly as you need them. Outline what you plan to say about each student's strengths and weaknesses and how you plan to address problem areas.
- > Provide comfortable seating—sitting together at a table is better than having you sit behind your desk.
- > Allow 20-30 minutes per conference and at least five minutes between each one to record notes and quickly review for your next appointment.
- > Greet parents at the door to allay their anxiety and let them know they're in the right place. Make sure you get the name right (it's more common these days for a child and his parent or guardian to have different last names).
- > Start the conference on a positive note by offering an observation about the child's positive achievements or interests. Then let parents know the agenda for the conference, and assure them they'll have time to ask specific questions.
- > Keep your comments specific. "Amanda had a whole week to finish up her book report, but she wrote only two paragraphs" is better than "Amanda doesn't accept responsibility."
- > Be ready to discuss a plan of action to address problems, both in terms of schoolwork and at-home support.
- > Speak clearly and eliminate jargon unfamiliar to most parents.
- > Invite parents to give their opinions and ideas.
- > Accentuate the positive. Recognize that no parent wants to hear a litany of complaints about his child's problems. Make sure to include strengths when possible.



- > Pay attention to your body language. Smile, nod, make eye contact and lean forward slightly. This sends the message that you're interested and approving.
- > Stress collaboration. Example: "I'd like to discuss with you how we might work together to improve Johnny's study habits."
- > Find out more. Ask parents if there's anything they think you should know about a child (such as study habits, relationship with siblings, important events in his life) which may affect his schoolwork.
- > Listen. You may be nervous and dominate the talk. Take time to ask questions and really listen to the responses. And don't judge—it can be a roadblock to a productive relationship with them.
- > Summarize. Before the conference ends, summarize the discussion and what actions you and the parents have decided to take.
- > Finish on a positive note. When you can, save at least one encouraging comment or positive statement about the student for the end of the conference.
- > Keep a record of what was said at the conference, what suggestions for improvement were made, and so forth. Make notes as soon as possible after the conference, while details are fresh.



MANAGING YOUR TIME

No doubt about it—your first year in the classroom will keep you busy, at school and home. Sometimes, it will feel like the job has completely taken over your life.

Every new teacher goes through it! After all, you're learning a new job, and a new work site, carrying a full load of students. So don't feel alone. Ask your mentor(s) or friendly faces in the teacher lounge how they coped with the workload, or if they have some suggestions for time savers. Find other new teachers and organize an informal support group or regular Friday afternoon social get-together. (Also, get involved with other younger Association members at your local meetings—the time you spend bonding and blowing off steam will help.)

Inevitably, the pressures of your new job will produce stress. A little stress is actually good. It can cause us to be more creative, to meet that deadline, or check-off that To-Do list.

But too much stress is counterproductive for most of us. If you're constantly feeling "stressed-out," chances are you're not feeling creative and may even be struggling to get your work

done in an efficient and organized manner.

Some pointers:

- > Take stock. Ask yourself: What do I like doing? What skills or talents could I develop more fully? What causes me the most grief? Then plan your days so that you take time to do things you like, develop your special skills and avoid situations that cause you grief.
- > Set reasonable goals. Be sure to set realistic goals for yourself. Don't try the impossible, but if there are things you want to accomplish, decide to do them. Divide them into manageable "chunks" and start chipping away at them.
- > Manage your time. Recognize when lack of time becomes your enemy. Set personal and professional priorities—and act on them. Anticipate when you will get in a time crunch, ask for help and head off problems.
- > Do the "musts" early. If you do the absolute "musts" early in the day, you will avoid feeling frantic. Do important things when you have the most energy.
- > Accept your limits. Do your best job, but remember that you do not have to be perfect. Allow for failure, and for improvement, the next time you do the same task.
- > Learn to say NO. No is a responsible answer if it won't result in losing your job, your family, or your life. If you find it difficult to say "no," try to be direct, honest and brief. Avoid defensiveness, and suggest alternatives.
- > Don't procrastinate. Procrastination leads to a sense of having more to do than you can ever possibly accomplish. Set deadlines and schedules for your work and stick to them. Use positive self-talk to get going. Be sure to reward yourself once the task is completed.
- > Get and stay healthy. When you are well rested, eat well and get enough exercise, you will naturally reduce your stress level. Do you need to make any changes in your lifestyle?
- > Give yourself a break. Learn to get away from your routine. Take short trips on the weekend. Relieve the pressure during the day with short walks or simple stretches. Make time for a hobby or activity that you love, no matter how busy your schedule is.

start your portfolio now

Every educator should have a portfolio or accordion-style file space to hold professional records and documents relating to employment. Your file should include such records as:

- > Letter of employment
- > Teaching license
- > Teaching contract and any supplemental contracts
- > School division handbook or other statement of personnel policies
- > Records relating to license renewal, including college transcripts
- > Evaluations of your performance
- > Any school-related insurance policies
- > Commendations, awards, honors
- > Records of job-related seminars, workshops, or conferences you attend
- > Record of leave days accumulated and used
- > Your written records of any incidents which may increase your liability, such as disciplinary actions or students' accidents
- > Record of assaults, violence, or classroom thefts
- > Correspondence to or from supervisors, including notes, self-development plans, plans of action, and records of compliance with requests

MAKING THE MOST OF THE WEB

Thanks to cheaper computers, the rise of the World Wide Web, and innumerable gizmos, you're part of the best-connected cadre of teachers ever to enter the classroom.

Compared to past generations of new teachers, you'll draw more of your instructional resources and professional information from online resources, and you're far more likely to use various technologies in the classroom and at home.



That's a big plus—but make sure the newer technologies serve your aims, since you'll have little time to waste your first year. Where the Web is concerned, aim to draw upon a limited number of reliable and helpful sites this year. Sift through them regularly to glean ideas and tips to help you teach your class, plan lessons, or involve yourself professionally.

14 Hot Spots

There are a limitless number of great sites on the Web. Which ones are most worth your time? You'll have to discover some of them for yourself, because any list is incomplete, but here are 14 that could prove helpful:

1 For a well-balanced site offering instructional resources, tips, and professional information, it's hard to beat www.nea.org, the home page of the National Education Association. You'll find tips on managing your classroom, news stories on trends in your profession, discussion boards to put you in touch with colleagues around the country, and much more. While you're at the site, you can sign up for one of several online newsletters that deliver the site's newest highlights to you every week or so.

2 You'll also want to follow developments in Virginia education, such as regulations and funding decisions that affect you and your fellow professionals. The VEA home page (www.veanea.org) keeps you informed, focusing on the implications for you and your students. The site also features stories on your colleagues and professional information from the *Virginia Journal of Education*.

3 Want tips or ideas you can put to use right away? Check out Education World (www.educationworld.com), one of the best resources of very practical strategies and tips for beginners. It also provides links on technology, parent involvement, and much more.

4 Of course, you need to stay current with instructional issues in your content area. Professional content-area organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (www.nctm.org), the International Reading Association (www.reading.org), and others are a great way to stay on top of the latest trends in your field. If you don't know which professional organization applies to your field, just Google your subject area.

5 Testing for the Virginia Standards of Learning looms large in most of the Commonwealth's schools. Your school or department chair can provide loads of information, but the Virginia Department of Education's SOL site (www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/index.html) also provides guidance. Useful resources include past versions of SOL tests that you can use for practice or to become familiar with the format and content.

6 Do you ever wish somebody compiled great lessons or materials in every content area and placed them online? Somebody did. The Gateway to Educational Materials project (www.thegateway.org) contains more than 50,000 records. May save you some work or provide some ideas.

7 It's that time of year. Lesson plans and other resources at www.edhelper.com/ are catalogued by months of the year. Perfect for lessons commemorating holidays, historical events, and the like.

8 Several sites target new teachers. One of the best is www.teachers.net, which features articles and ideas from Harry Wong, author of *The First Days of School*. The site offers free lessons, chat areas, and free classified ads for teachers.

steer clear of trouble spots

Even the most cautious educator can get snared by a spurious allegation. But legal experts interviewed by *NEA Today* say you can reduce your risk. Some tips:

- > Avoid touching a student, if possible. Avoid initiating hugs, especially with students in the upper grades. If you must break up a fight, try to use the least amount of force possible and contact an administrator immediately.
- > Try not to be alone with a student, especially in an isolated location. Don't drive a student home. And be sure to report any incident to your supervisor afterward.
- > Avoid saying things or writing notes to a student that could be misconstrued as personal or romantic. Also, avoid making off-the-cuff comments on a student's personal appearance.
- > If a student confides in you on a personal topic of a sexual nature, refer him or her to a school counselor. Also, make sure you know your obligation to report students' comments on such topics as suicide, pregnancy, abortion, or abuse under state law or division policy.
- > If a student says he or she has a crush on you, make it clear that a romantic relationship would be wrong and is simply not possible. And notify your administrator.

9 The Teachers Network (www.teachersnetwork.org) also offers lesson plans and boasts teacher research and online courses.

10 “You’re not alone.” Jump on a discussion board at www.theteacherscorner.net/forums/ and share your first-year experiences with other teachers.

11 Got a burning question your colleagues can’t answer? Post it on the Works4Me web site (www.nea.org/works4me) and get a response.

12 If you’re not getting enough of the nitty gritty reality in your faculty lounge, check out a teacher blog. One of the most popular is <http://hipteacher.typepad.com/>. Follow her diary online and post a comment.

13 Remember to keep your spirits up! If you’re at a low point, take time to laugh at some of the school humor at www.teachersfirst.com/humor.shtml.

14 As you progress in your teaching career, professional development will be crucial to maintaining and increasing your expertise. Check out Virginia’s Community of Anytime Knowledge (VCAK) for lots of online courses you can take when it’s most convenient for you to take them. VCAK is a partnership between Virginia public broadcasting station WHRO and the Virginia Society for Technology in Education. Learn about course offerings and graduate credit at www.anytimeknowledge.org ■

