



1

Taking Care of Teacher Business

Taking care of yourself as a teacher within your classroom is of utmost importance. Don't minimize the value of feeling organized and in control of your school day. Think of yourself as the lead actor on your classroom stage—you are the one who keeps the unfolding drama on track. If you haven't rehearsed your lines well and made sure all your props are in place, your little way-off-Broadway production will be a flop.

Chapter Outline

- Room Organization
- Teacher Desk Organization
- Planning
- Independent Activities While Teacher Works With Small Groups
- Reviewing Expectations
- Field Trips
- Making the Most of Your Paraprofessional Assistant

Room Organization

Stumped as to why *Sesame Street* turns into *Jerry Springer*? Frustrated when free time becomes a free-for-all? Perhaps it's time to change the channel—and the room arrangement—to encourage academic progress and squelch sassy behavior before it starts.

- ▶ Your first task is to find a success-oriented seating arrangement for your students (see Chapter 2 under the heading Classroom Seating). Once you have decided on this, it's important to realize that the arrangement of the remainder of the furniture is also key to classroom harmony. No matter how you choose to group desks, computers, reading materials, or activity centers, provide a clear travel path for you and your students to reach all work areas in the room.
- ▶ Be sure you have a clear view of the entire classroom from anywhere you may be working. Avoid the possibility of misadventure by keeping everyone in your line of sight.
- ▶ Likewise, be sure the entire class has an unobstructed view of you as well as the chalkboard, overhead projections, or any other visuals you may be using to teach a lesson. Students who cannot see what is happening quickly find other things to absorb their attention. Also note that when deciding on your seating plan, you should consider children who may have hearing or sight problems or other difficulties that might affect their ability to concentrate. Monitor this all during the school year, because changes often accompany physical growth in children.
- ▶ Remember that a neat, orderly room sets a good example for your students regarding their own desks and schoolwork. Resist the temptation to fill every open space with clutter. Clean up after activities that produce disarray—or better yet, give students the responsibility (see Chapter 2 under the heading Classroom Monitors and Jobs). Make it a point to leave your room neat and clean at day's end. It will help to set a positive tone for both you and your students the next morning.
- ▶ As soon as you detect a problem regarding room arrangement, fix it. Sometimes just a few minutes spent to adjust a screen, move a desk or table, or reorganize an activity center can eliminate potential classroom difficulties.

Teacher Desk Organization

If you admit—only to yourself, of course—that you have never seen the surface of your desk, that you are sure the mound you face daily must be reproducing itself, then you need to get organized quickly. If you haven't a clue as to how you can do so, read on.

- ▶ Think about the items you find on your desk and put them into categories. For example, communications from the office, notes from parents, homework, notes to yourself, and so forth—you might choose different categories from these. Then decide how you will file these things in a way that makes sense. You may use wire

baskets, file folders, colored pocket folders, or another method—whatever works for you. Label them so you will be sure to put your papers in the appropriate place.

- ▶ Most desks have at least one file drawer. Use such a drawer to file little needed items such as school catalogues or other things you may want to keep but don't use often. Use another drawer as a catchall—a place to hold any items that don't fit neatly into your desk organization plan. But remember to inventory this drawer frequently to discard things or find a permanent home for them.
- ▶ See what's left on your desk. Do you find paperclips, pencils, rubber bands, non-school-related items taken from students? You need to find a home in your desk drawer for these things. Take a look in there—did you recoil in horror? If so, get organized. You can buy inexpensive plastic containers of various shapes to hold all the miscellaneous desk supplies now cluttering the top of your desk; or use small cardboard boxes. If you want some items such as pencils, pens, and paperclips on your desk, then get a cup for writing tools, a holder for your paperclips, and so forth.
- ▶ Now that you are organized, the most important thing to remember is to make it a practice to use your new system regularly until it becomes a habit. Your plan is only as good as your ability to implement it. If you find you have little time during the day to put things in their appropriate places, take 5 minutes during lunch and then another 5 minutes at the end of the day to regroup.
- ▶ Try not to leave school without cleaning up your desk and placing things you'll need for tomorrow front and center. You'll be amazed at how good it feels to come in the next day to a neat desk with the day's agenda ready to tackle.

Planning

Do you white-knuckle your way through the school day as you and your students ride the daily schedule roller coaster? Do unplanned twists and turns churn your stomach into knots? If so, here's a soothing remedy for that queasy feeling.

- ▶ Don't underestimate the importance of written lesson plans—experienced as well as new teachers need them to provide a sense of direction and pacing for the week. Also, someday soon your principal will come looking for them—guaranteed. Equally important to plan for is the day you wake up unexpectedly with the flu. Knowing your completed lesson plans are on your desk for your substitute will calm both you and your administrator. Be aware also that it's a dangerous idea to wait too long to prepare your complete substitute teacher folder—your absences can be very unexpected.
- ▶ Most teachers—new and veteran—experience frustration with the ever-changing all-school schedule, special classes, and other interrupters to their day. The first thing to remember is this: The only thing certain in your day is that nothing is certain. Once you accept that fact, you can begin to bring some order to your schedule.

4 ■ Common-Sense Classroom Management for Elementary School Teachers

- ▶ One helpful way to begin to organize is to open your weekly lesson plan book and enter everything that you know is already scheduled for the week in question. Put in recess, music, art, gym, any programs or other all-school activities, and so forth. If your school has set blocks of time for certain academic areas such as reading and math, include them. Then note the times that specific students are gone from your classroom for whatever reason. You may even want to enter these things with a colored pen or pencil so they are quickly visible to you.
- ▶ Once you've done this, you can clearly identify the times remaining to be used for academic lessons, and you can add them to your plans. There will be weeks, during holiday periods or other special events, when teaching time will be at a premium. Laying out your schedule in this way allows you to maximize available teaching time for the benefit of your students.
- ▶ Until you get a sense for what your class can accomplish in a given amount of time, *overplan*. Completing a lesson the next day is much preferred to finding yourself stuck with dead air to fill. If this does happen, you will want to have a contingency plan (see Chapter 7 under the heading *If a Lesson Really Isn't Working*). Also be sure to include ideas for quiet, orderly transition times (see Chapter 8, *Transitioning*). Often the success of your plan will hinge on how well your group can transition from one activity to the next.

Independent Activities While Teacher Works With Small Groups

Does the phrase “ringmaster in a three-ring circus” come to mind as you juggle small groups, students at their desks, and the various comings and goings in your classroom? If you think a whip and a chair are the only things to bring order to this chaos, give these suggestions a try.

- ▶ Begin by thinking about your particular classroom situation. Are you teaching second grade or fifth grade? Are you alone all day or do you have an aide some of the time? Do you have access to any adult volunteer assistance? What are the dynamics of your classroom? Do you have several behaviorally or academically challenging students? All of these variables are factors in deciding how you will plan your large- and small-group work.
- ▶ One of the most challenging scenarios involves a younger group of children and no assistant in your classroom. You need to plan independent work for the large group while you teach a small group. Seatwork packets can be very useful if they are well thought out. These consist of three or four stapled pages of a variety of tasks that your students can complete with initial directions but little or no follow-up assistance from you. You can find many good workbooks in teacher supply stores addressing myriad academic skills, which can be resources for your work packets.
- ▶ These packets can address such areas as math, language arts, writing, spelling, critical thinking, or anything else you feel is valuable. Some teachers include board work with the packet or add it for students who work faster. A key element is that the work must be within the capability of students to do on their own.

Another important factor is to keep the work similar from day to day so that your directions are familiar. Vastly different work each day can cost you precious time giving and reiterating directions and can produce confusion and repeated questions from your students. Remember to have quiet-work choices for students who finish early, such as reading, journaling, completing unfinished assignments, and so forth.

- ▶ Seatwork of this type can be a valuable instructional tool—do not view it as busywork. It teaches individual responsibility, good listening, careful following of directions, and the ability to work independently. It can also provide a good academic review of skills you are teaching. Of course, all of this depends on your class being held responsible for the work. If students are not held accountable, the assignments will be meaningless. Be sure to take time to grade the work, and discuss it at least several times a week with your class.
- ▶ You can use this same concept with older students, with some variations. Often, upper-grade students have unfinished classroom or homework assignments to complete, which can occupy their time while you work with a small group. Work packets can be used as extra credit. A larger number of more challenging work pages can be included. Students can be given an entire week to complete these at their own pace to earn extra points. Older students often enjoy the challenge of managing and completing work they choose to do.

IDEA

For students with special education needs, consult with the special education teacher about what you plan to assign for independent work. The special education teacher may need to work with you to modify the activities so they are appropriate for the skill level of these students. Also, depending on the form of service delivery your school uses for special education students, the special education teacher may be in your classroom and use independent work time either to assist students with the work or to make sure they are up-to-date with other assignments.

Reviewing Expectations

Do you wish you had a tape recorder as you verbally replay your directions and classroom expectations? Remember, persistence pays off—even if it means hitting the rewind button again and again. Implementing the following suggestions will reap long-term benefits.

- ▶ Clearly post your classroom rules (see Chapter 9 under the heading Classroom Rules). Make them a living document by quoting them frequently to your students. Remember to state these rules in a positive manner, such as, “I am pleased to see Jerrell is keeping his hands and feet to himself.” By doing so, you send two messages: your classroom rules matter, and you notice when your students are complying with them. The more often you do this, the more significant your rules will become.
- ▶ Avoid forcing students to write rules as punishment. They become meaningless if used in this manner. In addition, writing should be viewed as a positive pursuit rather than a negative chore. Instead, ask the student to read the ignored rule and to remind the class why this rule was agreed on. Then continue with your

6 ■ Common-Sense Classroom Management for Elementary School Teachers

teaching—don't belabor the issue. Also be sensitive to occasional slips by otherwise well-behaved students.

- ▶ If a child repeatedly has difficulty with a particular expectation, meet with him or her to discuss possible solutions. Be sure to give the student ownership of the answer by expecting participation in deciding what will be done. In turn, when you observe this student following the rule—or any of the classroom rules—be quick to offer a compliment.
- ▶ Remind your class that behavior expectations follow them out of your classroom to wherever they may go within the building, on the playground, on the bus, or in the community. Reviewing your rules should be an important part of preparing your class to venture outside their classroom door, especially during the first several months of a new school year. Periodic praise and rewards for exemplary individual—as well as whole-class—behavior encourages students to make positive choices.
- ▶ Expectations for classroom work go hand in hand with behavior expectations and are equally important. Provide samples of work that exemplify your highest standards. Post examples of how you expect papers to be headed. Compliment a job well done. Discuss poor-quality work with the whole class if many are guilty; otherwise, speak individually to the offending students. Monitor your class as they work, by walking from desk to desk and commenting on work caliber. Be aware that quality of work may slip as the year progresses, and you may need to review expectations several times. Set standards for long-term projects, and be sure your class understands them. Review them throughout each project. Remember—all of these suggestions will work *only* if you make your students accountable for them.

Field Trips

Would you rather stick pins under your fingernails than take your class on a field trip? If the mere thought of organizing one of these adventures and then actually carrying it through gives you nightmares, take heart. It can be done with some simple but thorough preplanning.

- ▶ Get a jump on your field trip schedule by gathering information on potential outings as soon as possible—even as early as late spring for the following year if you know about your future class. Begin to compile a field trip folder and keep any information you gather for future reference, including your own comments regarding successes, failures, and changes to be made.
- ▶ Create a blanket field trip permission slip that can be used for any outing. Then all you need to do is fill in the blanks with current information. Make ample extra copies because some students will misplace theirs—perhaps more than once. Be sure to send the slips home with students well in advance, and provide daily reminders to return them. If money is involved, be sure you know your school's policy regarding students who, for whatever reason, do not pay. If a child has forgotten the permission slip on the day of the trip, confer with your school

administration as to whether a call to the parent for permission will suffice. *Do not make this decision yourself.*

- ▶ Discuss particulars of the trip thoroughly, several times, with your class. Cover provisions for lunch—will the school provide it, or will students need to bring their own? If the trip is outdoors or requires special clothing, be sure to address this. Don't assume children will know how to dress appropriately either for the weather or for the type of trip. Be sure your students are very clear about your rules during the trip. Before you go, discuss bus behavior and potentially inappropriate actions during the trip. You may even need to designate an adult helper to be available to sit with any disruptive students. Discuss your safety concerns—students should always be where they can see their chaperone and where their chaperone can see them.
- ▶ Do not underestimate your need for enough adult supervision. Doing so could compromise safety as well as enjoyment of the trip. You should plan to have one adult to no more than four children for younger groups and a ratio of one to five or six with older students. This, of course, also depends on student behavior and maturity level. You may also want to consider using nametags, which include the school name and phone number for younger children.
- ▶ Here are a few final but crucial reminders. Be sure all arrangements for payment for bus, admission, and any other expenses have been completed before the trip. Complications here could spoil the excursion for everyone. If your outing is dependent on good weather, have an alternate in-school plan in case inclement weather forces you to cancel the trip. Be sure you know the exact number of students you have taken with you, and *count* them before you get on the bus to return to school. Children have been known to be left behind.

Making the Most of Your Paraprofessional Assistant

Are you one of the lucky ones who has a paraprofessional or an educational assistant just begging for your direction and guidance? Are you not sure, though, where or how to direct someone over 3 feet tall? Once again, thoughtful preparation is the key.

- ▶ Never assume your paraprofessional or assistant has had formal training or practical experience directing or controlling children. Remember that this person is a helper to you and your class. Plan the aide's time so that he or she works under your guidance, especially at first. This will allow you to observe how the aide takes direction and carries it out as well as how the aide relates to your students. Be aware that your aide is not a surrogate teacher. Having one in your classroom is not meant to free you to sit at your desk or to go to the teachers' lounge.
- ▶ If you feel uncomfortable giving directions and orchestrating your assistant's every move, prepare a schedule. If possible, do this together to foster a sense of partnership. Your assistant may provide some valuable insight as to how best to support you. Be sure you have the supplies and materials ready for your helper's assigned task. If this person is working separately from you, always have one eye and one ear open in that direction so that if problems arise, you can step in quickly.

8 ■ Common-Sense Classroom Management for Elementary School Teachers

- ▶ If you feel tension building between you and your assistant, for whatever reason, address the problem as soon as possible. Waiting too long can only make it worse and lessen the chance of getting your professional relationship back on track. If your helper is unresponsive to your fence-mending efforts, you may need to seek the advice of a school administrator. But *choose this route only if your personal efforts have failed*. Also remember that praise and thanks are very inexpensive ways to maintain cordial relations. Try not to let a day go by without offering a word of appreciation for a job well done.
- ▶ Maintaining a united front with your assistant as you work with your class during the school day is extremely important. Disagreeing in front of your students is unprofessional. Your helper should be clear about your classroom expectations and should abide by your decisions. If your assistant deviates, don't use time in front of your class to debate the issue. Discuss it privately—and remember to listen to the assistant's side. Your helper may have some valuable insight into the situation.
- ▶ Your school may also have general aides to do clerical tasks, including copying materials for teachers. In addition to your school secretary and the engineer, you will want to be good friends with this person. One way you can do this is by following your school's guidelines for submitting materials to be copied. These will probably include providing clear directions as to how you want your materials completed and submitting them well in advance of your need for them. Remember that you are not the only one in your school using the services of this person. Your understanding when problems occur, and your willingness to show appreciation for good service, can help put you on this aide's favorite-teacher list.