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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
- Organizing the Room for Different Classes
- Teacher Desk Organization
- Planning
- Independent Activities While Teacher Is Assisting Other Students
- Reviewing Expectations
- Field Trips
- Making the Most of Your Paraprofessional Assistant

Room Organization

Stumped as to why *Dawson's Creek* turns into *Jerry Springer*? Frustrated when the passing bell rings just as the class is finally settled and ready to learn? It's time to change the channel—and perhaps the room arrangement—to encourage academic productivity and stop inappropriate behavior before it begins.

- ▶ 1. Your first task is to find a success-oriented seating arrangement for your students. (See Chapter 2, 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. To arrange your room, make a quick assessment about the layout and objects. First, categorize your room into the following areas: Off-limits, low-traffic, and high-traffic. Next, consider the objects in your room and the best place to store them. Items determined to be off-limits (grade book, teacher editions, scissors, etc.) should be placed away from student traffic areas. In addition, it's a good idea to keep these things locked inside a desk or cabinet. Materials students may need on occasion but should not have easy access to, such as markers or magazines for independent reading, should also be stored in these areas. Finally, things students use on a regular basis such as journals, notebooks, calculators, pencil sharpener, etc., should be in high-traffic areas to provide convenient access.
- ▶ 2. 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.
- ▶ 3. 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 in the classroom to absorb their attention. Also note that when deciding on your seating plan, consider students who may have hearing or vision problems or other difficulties that could affect their ability to concentrate.
- ▶ 4. Remember that a neat, orderly room sets a good example for your students regarding their own work area and schoolwork. Resist the temptation to fill every open space with clutter. Allow students a few minutes before passing to the next class to organize their materials and to help clean up their workspace for the next student. Make it a point to leave your room neat and clean at day's end. It helps to set a positive tone for both you and your students the next morning.
- ▶ 5. 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 a work area can eliminate potential classroom concerns.

Organizing the Room for Different Classes

Middle and high school teachers contend daily with several different classes of students. Don't let confusion reign as you try to keep each of them straight. Here are some simple but effective ways to stay organized. (Also see Chapter 2, Classroom Seating, for ideas on how to assign seats for middle and high school classrooms.)

- ▶ 1. To organize for different classes, consider color-coding each class (red for first hour, green for second hour, etc.). You may ask students to bring their own personal designated color folder to class, or you may choose to have students place their work in a specific color folder as they enter class.
- ▶ 2. Another way to keep each class's assignments organized is to use stacking baskets. Each basket should be labeled by subject and class hour, and students should be directed to place their work in the appropriate basket. This will save considerable time when you are recording grades as you won't have to sort the work by class beforehand.
- ▶ 3. Often, cooperative group activities are repeated in several classes throughout the day. An easy way to be sure the needed materials are on hand for each group is to place all necessary materials into containers (small bins, resealable bags, etc.). Then each table will have everything on hand. Be sure to assign some students to replace all materials at the end of class. It's a good idea to do a quick double check to make sure things have been replaced and to ensure nothing has been taken. Then you're ready for the next group and can begin without having to search for materials.

Teacher Desk Organization

If you admit—only to yourself, of course—that you have never seen the top of your desk, or 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.

- ▶ 1. 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, etc.—you might choose different groupings than 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, etc.—whatever works for you. Label them so you will be sure to put your papers in the appropriate place.
- ▶ 2. Most desks have at least one file drawer. Use one of these 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.
- ▶ 3. See what's left on your desk. Do you find paper clips, pencils, rubber bands, non-school-related items taken from students, and so on? 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 smaller cardboard boxes. If you want some items such as pencils, pens, and paper clips on your desk, then get a cup for writing tools and a holder for your paper clips.
- ▶ 4. 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

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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 five minutes during lunch and another five minutes at the end of the day to regroup.

- ▶ 5. 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.

Lesson Planning

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

- ▶ 1. *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—or you'll wake up unexpectedly with the flu. Knowing your completed lesson plans are on your desk for the substitute will calm both you and your administrator. Be aware also that it's a dangerous idea to wait too long to prepare your substitute teacher folder—absences can be very unexpected.
- ▶ 2. Lessons should be prepared in advance, and have a format that's meaningful to you and your students. A well-planned lesson should have the following components:
 - a. A clearly defined objective
 - b. An introduction to the day's lesson
 - c. Detailed procedures on how to teach the lesson
 - d. Guided practice by teacher on how to complete the assignment
 - e. Independent practice time for students
 - f. A summary of the day's lesson (closure)
- ▶ 3. Most teachers—new and veteran—experience frustration with the ever-changing all-school schedule, school assemblies, and other interrupters to their day. The first thing to remember is this: The only thing for sure in your day is that nothing is for sure. Once you can accept that fact, you can begin to bring some order to your schedule. One helpful way to begin to organize is to open your weekly lesson plan book, and enter everything you know is already scheduled for the week in question. Include your own and your students' lunch hours, your preparation hour, and any duty hours for which you are responsible. You should also incorporate any school assemblies or other upcoming activities that will impact your instructional planning. Once you've done this, you can plan the lessons for the upcoming week. If you teach one subject multiple times, it may be helpful to leave Friday's lesson plan somewhat flexible. This will provide the time to adjust your teaching so that all classes will have reached approximately the same place in your lesson by the end of the week. For the classes that are on hold while others catch up, use this time to provide extra practice activities such as educational games or extension activities such as creative writing, art activities, or Internet searches.

- ▶ 4. Until you get a sense of what your class can accomplish in a given amount of time, *over plan*. Completing a lesson the next day is much preferred to finding yourself with dead air to fill. It's also a good idea to have a backup lesson such as a subject review prepared and immediately available (copies made, materials on hand, etc.). This can come in very handy when the original lesson cannot be taught due to an unexpected event such as a fire drill or major class disruption. Keep in mind, however, that although an effective, well-planned lesson can help to decrease behavioral problems in the classroom, any downtime during instruction can quickly reduce the class to chaos. To minimize this, have all materials prepared and in place prior to instruction. Also, take the cue from your students to determine when it's time to move on. When talking escalates, volume grows, or movement increases, it's time to transition to the next activity.
- ▶ 5. If you have ever had to cover a colleague's class, you've probably learned two important lessons. First, you can't rely on the other teacher to leave a lesson plan, and second, you aren't an expert in all subject areas at all grade levels. Because substituting for another teacher is often an unavoidable responsibility at the middle/high school level, it's a very practical idea to have a lesson planned that is generic enough for any subject/grade and that will be motivating to students. This can be a great way to save your sanity—when called to cover a class, just grab your sub folder, and go with the security of knowing you won't have to wing it.

Independent Activities for Students

Students work at different paces. Some will take the entire class period to complete their work, while others seem to finish within minutes of receiving the assignment. Although the key to avoiding downtime is good planning, there will be times when a filler activity is needed. This will enable you to keep that all-important, quiet work atmosphere for everyone. Consider these useful suggestions:

- ▶ 1. Be sure to have additional activities available for students who finish early. This may include assignments for extra credit, completing odd jobs such as compiling work and notes for students who are absent, grading papers (when appropriate), checking in work, or preparing the next month's bulletin board display. A stockpile of current, appropriate magazines and newspapers is also a great way to keep students quiet while others are still working.
- ▶ 2. Students who finish early can be a great assistance to their peers. Consider using study buddies as instructional support for those struggling with the assignment. Study buddies, when used appropriately, not only provide additional support but also reinforce the academic skills of more capable students. In addition, the extra help provided by peers allows you to manage classroom behavior or work with individual students. Here are a few suggestions to consider when utilizing study buddies in your classroom. First, make sure your students know that the role of a study buddy is to re-teach and not to do the work for their peer. Second, because you know your students' strengths and weaknesses, study buddies should be assigned by the teacher and not self-selected. Finally, allow

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students the choice of working alone. Making it mandatory for a student to ask for help or to offer help to a peer reduces the effectiveness of this instructional approach.

- ▶ 3. Do you give students time at the end of the class hour to start their homework, but find that some would rather socialize? If so, try providing an in-class assignment to be completed by the end of the hour. Make sure this task is very similar to the homework assignment, as this will provide both you and the students the opportunity to see if they clearly understand the expectations and directions for their homework. To encourage students to use their time wisely and to keep a productive work environment, let them know you will collect this assignment at the end of the hour as their ticket out of class. Be sure to give students credit for the completed assignment.
- ▶ 4. Create independent workstations for students to challenge their minds and keep them busy when they finish assignments early. An example of one such independent activity is “Moolah Mystery.” Here’s how to set this up:
 - a. Cut out 26 silhouettes of a cow. Then, above each silhouette, write a letter of the alphabet and a dollar amount (for instance: A = \$2.00, B = \$13.50, C = \$7.00, D = \$4.00, E = \$14.00, F = \$6.00, etc.). Staple the silhouettes of cows onto a bulletin board in an orderly manner.
 - b. Now that you have the workstation ready, it’s time to set up the problem to be solved. Think of a particular name, topic, term, or person being studied in class. This will become the answer for the students to guess. Then, using the dollar amount assigned to each letter of the word, total up the dollar value of the word. For example, based on the dollar amount assigned to the letters above, the word “café” would be worth \$29.00.
 - c. Finally, create a clue to go along with the answer, and staple it to the bulletin board near the cow silhouettes. For example, “The setting from the novel we are reading is worth \$29.00.”
- ▶ 5. You will need to teach your students how to work toward solving the mystery before you allow them to work at the station. Practice together by having students brainstorm possible answers and then adding the letters of the term to see if it equals the stated amount. When students have completed their work, allow them to go to the workstation to try to solve the mystery. Have them write their name on a scrap of paper, and place their guess, showing their addition, into a jar near the teacher’s desk. The teacher will determine when it’s time to pull a name from the jar. Factors such as the difficulty of the clue or the length of time posted will impact this decision. As the teacher draws from the jar, a correct answer earns the student a small prize. If an incorrect answer is pulled, the teacher should continue drawing names until there is a correct answer.

The level of difficulty of this activity can easily be modified based upon the money amounts. For instance, for minimum challenge, you may want to assign whole-dollar money amounts such as A = \$10.00, B = \$25.00, and so forth to each cow or increase the challenge by using larger denominations (A = \$789.00, B = 1,233), change (A = 78.52, B = 12.89), or even add an additional step to the problem-solving process by asking students to round all dollar amounts to a specified amount. For example, if the additional step was to round all cow dollar amounts to the nearest 10 dollars, A = \$457.22 would be rounded to \$460.00, B = \$12.33 would be rounded to \$12.00,

Figure 1.1 Moolah Mystery

A=\$2.00	B=\$13.50	C=\$7.00	D=\$1.25	E=\$18.00	F=\$11.00	G=\$6.75
						
H=\$9.00	I=\$3.00	J=\$13.00	K=\$19.50	L=\$12.00	M=\$21.25	N=\$0.50
						
O=\$4.00	P=\$36.00	Q=\$67.00	R=\$25.00	S=\$17.25	T=\$99.00	
						
U=\$45.50	V=\$57.00	W=\$1.75	X=\$75.75	Y=\$200.00	Z=\$31.00	
						

Example: The setting from the novel we are currently reading is worth \$22.50.

and so forth. An easy way to set up this challenge would be to post the following prompt, "Remember to round each money amount to the nearest 10 dollars as you attempt to solve this mystery," right below the mystery clue. This activity can also be adapted for a more mature audience by changing the title and using a shape other than a cow.

IDEA

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

Reviewing Expectations

Do you ever wish that 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. These useful ideas will reap long-term benefits:

- ▶ 1. Clearly post your classroom rules. (See Chapter 6, Classroom Rules.) Make them a living document by quoting them frequently to your students. Remember to state them in a positive manner such as, "Work quietly in your assigned area."

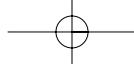
By doing so, you accomplish two things: You demonstrate that classroom rules matter, and you clearly state the acceptable classroom behavior.

- ▶ 2. Avoid forcing students to write rules as punishment. They become meaningless if used in this manner. If you feel you must assign some sort of written punishment, use Think Paper (see Figure 1.2). This not only provides students with an opportunity to give their side of the story, but also helps them to process why the problem occurred and to identify better options for the future.
- ▶ 3. Do not chastise student in front of their peers. Instead, ask them to meet you in a private place so that you can have a personal conversation regarding their behavior. You will be amazed at how differently students act when they don't have their peers as an audience.
- ▶ 4. If a student repeatedly has difficulty with a particular expectation, meet with the student individually to discuss possible solutions. A contract between the teacher and student is a great way to assign ownership of the behavior and the plan for change. Make a copy of the contract—one for you to keep and the other copy for the student.

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 through gives you nightmares, take heart. It can be done with some simple but thorough preplanning.

- ▶ 1. 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 past successes, failures, and changes to be made.
- ▶ 2. 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 as some students will misplace theirs—perhaps more than once. Be sure to send the slips home 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 student has forgotten his or her 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.
- ▶ 3. Discuss particulars of the trip thoroughly several times with your class. Cover provisions for lunch—will the school provide, will students need to bring their own, or will they have an opportunity to buy lunch during the trip? If the trip is outdoors or requires special clothing, be sure to address this. Don't assume students will know how to dress appropriately either for the weather or for the type of trip. Be sure students are very clear about rules and expected behavior during the trip. In addition, just as you prepare a classroom lesson, you should



Think Paper

Name _____

Date _____

What the problem was

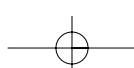
What I did

Why I did it

Did my actions solve the problem?

In the future, what might be a better way to solve this problem?

Copyright should come



also develop a lesson plan for the field trip. Students should be assigned work to complete on the trip such as a study guide, note taking on a particular aspect of the trip, or participation in a scavenger hunt activity related to the trip's purpose.

- ▶ 4. Do not underestimate your need for enough adult supervision. Doing so could compromise safety as well as enjoyment of the trip. At the middle school level, plan a ratio of one adult for every five or six students. High school students can usually check in with a chaperone at designated times throughout the trip. This, of course, depends on student behavior and maturity level as well as the destination. At any grade level, identify a meeting place for students to go if they have a problem, and assign a chaperone to check back at this location every half hour or so.
- ▶ 5. Here are a few final but crucial reminders. Be sure that all arrangements for payment for bus, admission, and so forth, 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. Make sure students know the school phone number as well as the time to meet back at the bus. Finally, be sure you know the names and exact number of students you have taken, and *count* them before you get on the bus to return to school. Students have been known to be left behind.

Making the Most of Your Paraprofessional Assistant

Are you one of the lucky ones to have paraprofessional time or an educational assistant just begging for your direction and guidance? Are you not sure, though, where or how to direct someone over 18 years old? Once again, thoughtful preparation is the key.

- ▶ 1. Never assume your paraprofessional or assistant has had formal training or practical experience directing or controlling students. Remember that this person is a helper to you and your class. Plan this person's time so he or she works under your guidance, especially at first. This will allow you to observe how your assistant takes direction and carries it out and how he or she 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 the person's every move, prepare a schedule. If possible, do this together to foster a sense of partnership. Also, 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 your helper is working separately from you, always have one eye and one ear open in his or her direction so if problems arise, you can step in quickly.
- ▶ 2. Because your paraprofessional or aide is probably dividing his or her day among several teachers, time to meet and plan may be at a premium. Face-to-face conversation is the preferred method of communication. However, if that proves impossible, consider communicating via e-mail or notes. Keep a notebook

in a designated spot on your desk, and use it to jot instructions and other pertinent information regarding the students. When your assistant arrives, he or she can read your notes, complete the tasks, and then provide an update on what was accomplished with your students.

- ▶ 3. 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.
- ▶ 4. 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 your assistant's side. He or she may have some valuable insight into the situation.
- ▶ 5. Your school may also have general aides to do clerical tasks including copying materials for teachers. In addition to your school secretary and janitor or maintenance engineer, you will want to become 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, you are not the only one in your school using the services of this person. Your understanding when problems occur and willingness to show appreciation for good service can help put you on this aide's favorite teacher list.