

What to do the first day

Ideally, the first day will alleviate the anxieties your students will probably be experiencing before starting a new school year. After all, some of them may have had bad experiences in former years, and don't know what to expect from you. Everything done the first day, therefore, should begin the process of helping them to feel comfortable, motivating them to learn and work hard, as well as uniting the group socially.

Your goal on the first day should be to accomplish four basic tasks:

1. To set class goals for the year.
2. To create social guidelines for how you are going to behave towards each other.
3. To begin to establish the democratic process.
4. To begin the process of getting to know each other.

Setting class goals

Your primary aim here is to spark interest in the subjects you are going to teach. Give them an overview of all the subjects --the big picture as well as the highlights -- so that they can say to themselves: "Gee, by the end of the year I will have learned all about X."

Say things like: "We're going to be doing a lot of reading this year about the pioneers. We'll be putting on a play about them, and even create our own pioneer village."

Use enthusiasm. Show your own interest and excitement about the subjects you are going to teach. Let them know that they will have input into how these subjects are covered, that you would be interested in hearing their ideas of how to make the curriculum more interesting.

The democratic process

The ideal forum for the expression of the above ideal of respect is the class meeting. Talk to your class about what the meeting is (see chapter 10) and how it will work. Stress to your students that the class meeting will be used to make decisions together, plan special events, and solve difficulties.

This will probably be the first exposure your students have to the idea of a class meeting, so show them what a typical agenda might look like. Talk about when you will have the meetings, and the different roles they will take in conducting them.

Get them excited about it. Point out how good they are going to get at helping each other solve problems, in leading meetings, and just generally expressing their feelings and listening to each other.

One of the most important things to do that first day is to have an actual class meeting. It's never too early to get them used to the idea that class meetings will be held regularly over the year, and that they will be the most important decision-making mechanism the class will have. Briefly show them how the chairperson operates, as well as everything else pertaining to the running of a meeting. Hold a short (half-hour) meeting the first day with a follow-up meeting the next day and every day the first week to keep the ball rolling and to firmly establish the meeting format in their minds. After that you can hold them once a week.

You might want to structure your first class meeting around the idea of creating social guidelines.

Creating social guidelines

Just as important as what you will be learning is how the class will function together socially. Think of it as the “social curriculum”. Stress that you can only achieve the first goal – to learn – if you are all happy in the class and getting along with each other. Explain that the freedom to learn involves limits and responsibilities. Use the analogy that if everyone didn't agree to line up to get on a bus, everyone would be pushing and shoving and it would be much harder to get on the bus. Respect and cooperation help groups function better and accomplish more in a more pleasant way. Have a discussion on the basic social guidelines you will use to govern the social interplay within the classroom, which will be based on mutual respect. Talk about ways you can all demonstrate respect for each other.

The teacher and the class should then work together to come up with a set of “rules of respect”, such as:

- being on time
- speaking to each other in respectful ways
- listening to each other
- eliminating put downs
- taking care of the physical classroom
- respecting yourself

This list will be added to as a result of decisions made in class meetings and other discussions.