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What Do I Do at the Start of the School Year?

The beginning of the school year sets the tone for everything that follows. Your teacher moves and activities help establish your expectations for your students, set up several of your key routines, and make the initial steps in creating your classroom culture. Additionally, how your classroom is set up and decorated communicates how you view what teaching math looks like, how students will learn, and how students will be treated. Here are some ideas to start the school year, but note that you can implement them at any time.

WHAT SHOULD I DO BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEAR STARTS?

Before you start, think about what your curriculum includes and what you want your classroom culture to be. The former of these means you need to look at district curriculum guides, the materials your district/school have available to you, and the information you can find about past strengths and areas of concern for your students. This can help you think about the trajectories you want your lessons to take, find tasks that fit the cultural and social backgrounds of your students, and plan out a possible timeline for the year (keeping in mind that this will change as you get to know your students better and gain a deeper understanding of their strengths and struggles). You also want to start thinking about how you will build a positive and inviting culture for your students and their families. Part of that includes initiating communication with caregivers before school starts (see Communication, p. 32). Get to know more about your students by reading over IEPs/504 plans and by talking to intervention specialists to learn about strategies you may want to try.

WHAT SHOULD MY ROOM LOOK LIKE?

An important factor to consider is whether you will have your own room or whether you will be traveling among different rooms. If you do not have your own room, you will be restricted in some of what you can do. However, there are several things you should decide.

HOW WILL I ARRANGE MY FURNITURE?

Think about whether you want rows of desks or small groups of desks or whether students will be seated at tables or there will be other arrangements (see Classroom Organization, p. 60). There is a growing movement of teachers subscribing to the classrooms described in Liljedahl's (2021) *Building Thinking Classrooms*, in which there are tables or groups of desks for students to use for storage of materials or individual work as needed as well as nonpermanent surfaces (whiteboards, chart paper, chalkboards) for students to use. In this type of arrangement, vertical, nonpermanent surfaces are used for student workstations. Think about the message you want to convey with your furniture. Does it let students know you value student thinking, participation, and collaboration?

WHAT SHOULD I HANG ON MY WALLS?

To create a positive, inclusive, and student-centered classroom, hanging posters or wall hangings about the value of perseverance, your belief that every student is capable of learning, and motivation are a good start. Also consider the benefit of having displays about famous mathematicians that include a variety of different races, genders, and ethnicities. You may also want to include posters that recognize the diverse cultural wealth in your classroom, especially inclusive and affirming posters. Bulletin boards can have interesting math facts, math recreations (math jokes, logic puzzles), connections to the community, or opportunities for students to share about themselves (voluntarily, as some may not want to partake at the start of the year). For example, students place a card with their name in a Venn diagram with sections such as “I learn from my mistakes,” “I am a hard worker,” and “I am good at group work”; this sets an asset-based tone and helps you learn a little about your students’ identities (see *Culturally Relevant*, p. 29, and *Community*, p. 15).

WHAT HAPPENS IN MY FIRST CLASSES?

The first days of school are prime times to pique students’ interest. Starting the first day with reading your class rules, going over your syllabus, or distributing materials are not inherently interesting and can be covered later. Here are some tips about things you want to include and address as your year starts.

Tip 1 *Get to know your students*

You may want to do a student survey on their beliefs about their mathematical identities (see *Identity*, p. 24) or their feelings about mathematics. Having students write a mathematical autobiography is another way to learn about your students and their attitudes toward math classes. Use a student strengths–based survey to learn more about your students as well (see *Strengths*, p. 21).

Tip 2 *Set some of your classroom routines* (see *Routines*, p. 55)

Consider having a noncurricular mathematics task to start the year. Use your routine of randomly assigning groups, so students start to become accustomed to it (see *Grouping*, p. 57). Establish how you will take attendance, assign tasks, observe student work, offer assistance to students, and go about other procedural routines. As the week progresses, think about using routines such as *Notice and Wonder* (in which students look at a task or set of data and then share what they notice about it and what they wonder about it) or how work is shared in class, which will give you some formative assessment opportunities for learning what your students know (see *Routines*, p. 55).

Tip 3 *Set your classroom norms* (see *Collaborative Norms*, p. 18)

This is the perfect time to let students know you respect them and want their input. Working together to create your norms gives them voice and creates more student buy-in. After you have done a group problem, ask students to think about what made their work easier to accomplish and what impeded their work. These ideas will be part of setting your norms.

