

The First Six Weeks of School

Paula Denton
Roxann Kriete

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS SERIES



Week One

CHAPTER ONE

F

rom the moment students arrive at school I try to give them “instant ownership of their room.” They need right away to feel known and liked by their teacher. They need to make an impact on the environment, to see that the fact that they are there makes a difference. The children also need to feel comfortable within that environment. The focus of the first week of school is upon getting to know each other and the routines and layout of the school.

Week One

DEBORAH PORTER, *first-grade teacher*

Deborah is speaking about first-graders, but her statements ring true for learners of all ages. In the first week of school, teachers must provide plenty of safe, comfortable ways for class members to get to know each other, to share their ideas and interests, and to feel a sense of safety and comfort in their classroom. This requires careful planning and direction of nearly every moment of the first few days.

During the first week of school, when we are getting to know each other and learning basic procedures (such as lining up and lunch routines), there are no general class rules. Those rules will be generated and articulated by the group later. It is critical, however, that children have a clear understanding of our expectations and boundaries from the moment they enter the classroom.

Paula remembers well her son’s first day of kindergarten. As they drove home at the end of the day, she asked him how he liked school. He burst into tears. “I don’t know what the rules are!” he sobbed. His teacher’s expectations were not clear to him. He was afraid he would discover the rules only by breaking them and “getting in trouble.” The start to his school career was filled with anxiety!

In contrast, we want children, from the first day of school, to feel secure and successful because they know the rules of the culture. Teaching proactively is essential during these early days. Teachers must discuss and model new routines and experiences and let students practice them before they are actually performed.

At this point, rules are very specific and are related to the concrete actions of each activity—"In our meetings, one person speaks at a time," or "When the bell rings, everybody freezes." Behaviors are modeled and practiced, modeled and practiced, over and over in each new situation. A rhythm of practice and learning is established when children learn how to "freeze" at the bell signal, and it continues as they learn to arrange themselves for Morning Meeting, line up to go outside, use the name tag system to go to the bathroom, etc.

Overview

As adults, we often forget how much knowledge and attention it takes for a child to walk quietly in the hall, invite a friend to lunch, choose a book from the library and settle in to read for half an hour, or pack a bag to get ready for dismissal. In the early days of the school year, we need to break down the steps for each classroom procedure. By involving the children in discussion and by modeling what to do in each situation, we alleviate anxieties about *not* knowing and clarify the teacher's expectations.

All of this teaching and practicing must occur in a rich and meaningful context. As you will see in the lesson plans themselves, much of the content of the first week's curriculum focuses upon and grows from the children themselves. Rather than beginning work in textbooks and workbooks right away, students are learning morning greetings, bringing in and studying family photographs, talking about favorite books, and sharing their hopes and dreams for the upcoming year. Through "guided discoveries," students exchange and extend the good ideas and knowledge they have about using school materials and tools such as math manipulatives, crayons, and dictionaries. These activities form the core around which skills are learned and developed. As students reveal their strengths, and generate and share ideas, they become active participants in their learning and assume increasing responsibility in small, incremental steps.

During the first week, all students are doing the same thing at the same time, though students may be in small groups, with partners, or by themselves at times. The teacher is highly focused upon the process of the group and, when not engaged in active instruction, is observing students and giving them frequent feedback.

In her book *Teaching Children to Care*, Ruth Charney writes about the importance of seeing children and letting them know that you see all that happens in the classroom during the early weeks of school: “My chair, my table or desk is where I can see the entire classroom. When I work with a small group, my chair is turned so that I see the room. I often gather the whole group in a circle so that everyone sees everyone else. I walk in the back—not the front—of the line. I see everyone. And everyone knows that I see because I let them know with my comments, over and over.” (Charney 1991, 21)

While the open-ended nature of many activities encourages discovery and presents cognitive challenges, we do not give direct instruction in new skills or introduce content that will be highly demanding for many in the group during this time. We want students to begin the year reminded of all they have learned, not overwhelmed by what they do not know.

Even more importantly, we want to focus our energy and attention on teaching behavior and establishing a tone. Teachers must be free to see—and to let children know that we see with our comments—the carefulness of work, the kindness of interactions, the attention to cleaning up a table. They must be free to notice also when work is not careful, interactions are not kind, and a table is not cleaned—and to demand a higher standard.

These are the teachings of the early weeks of school—not the new hard math concepts or vocabulary lists. New content and skills are certainly important, and we love teaching them, but they will wait. Teaching the skills of cooperation and collaboration and establishing a productive learning climate allows, enriches, and enhances the academic and social learning that comes later.

It is not always easy to restrain ourselves during these early weeks from leaping ahead and unfurling the year’s full-blown curriculum which has been incubating in our heads all summer. “Teachers who come to believe in this approach,” writes Chip Wood in *Time to Teach, Time to Learn*, “talk about how hard it is to follow it as they watch their colleagues zoom ahead in the curriculum, how much they worry they will never get their children to catch up. But like the tortoise and the hare, slow but sure wins the race.” Teachers who devote time during these early weeks to setting goals, generating rules, exploring materials, and building a trustworthy space for learning find that in the end the approach pays off greatly. “In the long run, time is gained and enriched for teachers and students alike. Discipline difficulties are fewer and less time-consuming than in other classrooms where the social expectations were not a

clear focus. There is greater understanding of academic expectations and academic outcomes are improved.” (Wood 1999, 205)

The first week is a time to help children see their school as a place where they belong and where they know and can meet expectations. They need to feel comfortable and supported, excited and challenged. By the week’s end, the classroom walls display students’ work; the air holds echoes of their voices offering a hope, venturing an idea about those curved lines on a globe, singing a new song, or laughing at a lunchtime joke. A new community—with a sense of purpose and with rules, routines, and responsibilities that support that purpose—is forming.

Goals for Week One

Though the details of our plans differ with different grade levels (as you will see in the sample lesson plans that follow), the following specific goals for the first week of school pertain to all grade levels:

- Students and teachers will know each other's names.
- Students and teachers will be able to name some interests and out-of-school activities or experiences of members of the class.
- Students will know the basic expectations for and will successfully perform the following basic routines of the school day with close teacher supervision and reinforcement:

Arrival

Transitions

Lining up and

moving through halls

Bathroom procedures

Recess

Activity/work times

Lunch

Signals

Work-sharing

Whole-group meetings

Quiet time

Cleanup

Dismissal

- Students and teachers will name and share their hopes and dreams for the school year.
- Students will generate ideas and procedures for using basic tools and materials for reading, math, art, recess, and writing, and will explore their use further in open-ended activity times.
- Each child will present her/his work to the group at least two or three times (with exceptions made for very shy children).
- Children's art, writing, and personal artifacts will be displayed around the room.

Goals for Week One

Day One

- 8:15** Class scavenger hunt
- 8:40** Teach transitions
- 9:00** Morning Meeting
Play "Memory Name Game"
Share results of the scavenger hunt
Discuss and model bathroom procedure
- 9:30** Teach lining up and walking through the halls
- 9:45** Outside
Teach circling up
Play tag games
- 10:15** Guided discovery: classroom library
Introduction and participatory modeling
Choosing books and silent reading
Group sharing: children share why they chose their book
- 11:20** Outside: play "Ship"
- 11:50** Teach lunch routines
- 12:00** Lunch
- 12:30** Read-aloud: *Rikki Tikki Tavi*
- 1:00** Guided discovery: art supplies
Introduce crayons, markers, and colored pencils
Participatory modeling
Open-ended drawing time
- 1:45** Cleanup: introduce cleanup jobs and procedures
- 2:20** Teach format for work-sharing, and a few volunteers present their drawings
- 3:00** Dismissal

Homework: Bring in a "souvenir" (artifact, nap, drawing, postcard, etc.) that represents something fun you did this summer.

Day Two

- 8:15** Label making: children will use art supplies to make beautiful labels for their cubbies and coat hooks and various areas in the room (art area, library, etc.)
- 8:40** Practice "freezing" at bell signal and coming to Morning Meeting
- 8:45** Morning Meeting
Teach simple greeting
Work-sharing: a few students present summer souvenirs
News and announcements
- 9:15** Outside: play "Capture the Flag"
- 9:45** Guided discovery: writing
Discuss reasons people write and generate a list of possible genres and topics for writing in our class
Participatory modeling of procedures for writing time
Students pair-share ideas for writing and check in with teacher to report what they've decided to write today
Twenty-minute writing time practicing procedures modeled
Brief work-sharing
- 10:45** Silent reading
- 11:15** Reading reflection: "Tell one thing that you read about today"
- 11:30** Outside: play "Ship" and tag games
- 12:00** Lunch
- 12:30** Read-aloud
- 1:00** Hopes and dreams
Discussion and introduction of worksheet
Individual work on worksheet
Pair-share completed worksheets
- 2:00** Guided discovery: math manipulatives (multilink cubes, pattern blocks, Cuisenaire® rods)
- 2:45** Cleanup
- 3:00** Dismissal

Day Three

- 8:15** Morning chart: greet children with news and announcements about the day and some riddles to solve about classmates (for example, "Who spent the summer in Florida with her grandmother?" or "Who says pizza is their favorite food?")
- 8:30** Morning Meeting
Simple greeting from Day Two
Summer souvenir sharing (five or so students)
News and announcements: read and discuss morning chart
- 9:00** Guided discovery: playground
- 10:00** Reading
Introduce reading logs (model how to use them and create some possible entries together)
Silent reading time with each student making his/her first log entry
Share a few of them, if time
- 11:00** Writing
Continue brief open-ended writing projects to practice and reinforce yesterday's guided discovery
Use pair-share and teacher check-ins
- 11:30** Outside: playground games
- 12:00** Lunch
- 12:30** Read-aloud
- 1:00** Hopes and dreams: lesson on symbols and activity
- 2:00** Guided discovery: math games (Krypto®, Yahtzee®, Pick-Up Sticks®, Dominoes®)
- 2:45** Cleanup
- 3:00** Dismissal
- Homework:* Choose a favorite personal photograph to bring in and share with classmates.

Day Four

- 8:15 Morning chart:** check "homework" and ask any students who forgot it to draw a scene from their lives
- 8:30 Morning Meeting**
Same simple greeting
More summer souvenir presentations
News and announcements
- 9:00 Writing**
Pair-share photographs (or drawings) brought in as homework
Students write about their photos (rough drafts)
Brief work-sharing
- 10:00 Outside:** play "Smaug's Jewels"
- 10:30 Reading**
Silent reading
Write in log
Brief work-sharing
- 11:30 Outside:** playground games (when going out, debrief on how playground time went yesterday)
- 12:00 Lunch**
- 12:30 Read-aloud**
- 1:00 Introduce math activity time:** choosing and working with math games and manipulatives
Teach sign-up procedure for math choice
Model and practice making a choice, setting up and doing activity, and cleanup
- 2:00 Complete and share hopes and dreams symbols**
- 2:45 Cleanup**
- 3:00 Dismissal**

Day Five

- 8:15 Morning chart:** ask for volunteers to make a bulletin board of our hopes and dreams symbols
- 8:30 Morning Meeting**
Simple greeting
More summer souvenir presentations (final day)
News and announcements
- 9:00 Writing**
Introduce standards and procedures for final drafts
Children write final drafts of their writing about their photograph
Work-sharing
Ask for volunteers to make a bulletin board display of the photos and writing
- 10:00 Outside:** play "Capture the Flag"
- 10:30 Reading**
Whole-group check-in: What are you enjoying about reading? What is hard about it?
Silent reading (begin individual reading assessments)
Write in reading logs and share a few entries
- 11:30 Outside:** playground games
- 12:00 Lunch**
- 12:30 Read-aloud**
- 1:00 Generating classroom rules**
Whole-group introduction relating rules to our hopes and dreams
Brainstorming rules
Restating rules in the positive and categorizing them
- 1:45 Math activity time** (begin individual math assessments)
- 2:30 Cleanup and introduce Friday closing circle**
- 3:00 Dismissal**

**Sample
Schedule****Week One****Middle
Grades
(3-4)**

Week One

MIDDLE GRADES (3-4)

Community Building and Tone Setting

Class scavenger hunt

Community Building and Tone Setting

As the children enter on the first day, I greet them with a scavenger hunt list and a clipboard. The list begins with a directive such as "Find a person in our room who..." and then lists options such as "has a baby brother," "ate toast for breakfast," or "was born in another state." As I hand the children their lists, I tell them that they may ask and answer only one question per person before moving on to a new person. When they find a person who fits the criteria for one of the items, they ask that person to sign his/her name beside the item. The goal is to find a person who fits each item on the list. (See the sample scavenger hunt on the next page.)

This is a fun activity that gets the children moving about the room, greeting and speaking to everyone in the room at least once. Those who are feeling shy often begin by answering others' questions, and soon become a purposeful part of the hubbub. For those who are outgoing, this activity organizes their energy and directs it toward a wider range of classmates than they might speak to on their own. As each child "hunts," she/he begins to get to know classmates better and becomes more comfortable moving about and speaking in the classroom.

Making labels

As children enter on the second day, I direct them to find a seat at the table with their name tag and to decorate labels which will identify their own cubbies and coat hooks as well as various areas in the room. The carefully lettered and beautifully decorated labels naming Art Supplies, Class Library, and Science Equipment say clearly that this is a place where children live. As they help each other to use the special extra-wide, extra-adhesive tape to affix the labels, they grow familiar with and begin to assume ownership of the room.

Scavenger Hunt

Rules: Ask only one question for each person at a time.

For example, if you ask someone named Jon if he had toast for breakfast, you must ask someone else about one of the items before you can ask Jon another question.

If someone answers a question YES, have him or her sign their name next to the item they answered.

Try to find a different person to sign for each item.

FIND SOMEONE WHO:

1. had toast for breakfast _____
2. has a baby in the family _____
3. went swimming this summer _____
4. is an only child _____
5. has 3 or more brothers and sisters _____
6. was born in another country _____
7. was born in another state _____
8. went to a different school last year _____
9. plays football _____
10. is wearing new shoes _____
11. knows how to ice skate _____
12. loves to draw _____
13. can jump rope backwards _____
14. walks to school _____

Week One

**Middle
Grades
(3-4)**

Displaying student work

By the end of the week, lively exhibits of students' summer souvenirs, personal photographs and related writing, and the visual symbols of their hopes and dreams for the year ahead will fill our bulletin boards and display shelves.

Students who volunteer for display committees will take charge of mounting student work with care, choosing background colors and paper, and considering what the title of the display should be. Questions will arise about details such as how to spell "souvenir" and whether the photos look best in rows or arranged collage-style. Classmates will begin to draw upon each other's talents: "Here, Ella, you can tell when things look straight. Will you hang this one?" "A.J., will you make those cool letters with shadows like you did on your cubby label?"

Community Building and Tone Setting

Students will spend lots of time perusing these exhibits in the days ahead. They point out their own work and locate the work of their peers. By displaying the collective impact of our individual contributions, each exhibit serves as a visual reminder of the power of community.

Morning Meeting

We begin Morning Meeting on the first day. Going around in the circle, each student says his/her name and favorite food and then tries to name the three preceding people and their favorite foods (for example, "Pizza, Travis; ice cream, Will; and spaghetti, Anna"). It is an easy and nonthreatening beginning sharing—lighthearted but not silly. It allows association of names with faces and is a great rehearsal for the remembering of names, which the next days' Morning Meeting greetings will require.

On the second day, I introduce a very simple greeting and lead a conversation about the process. "Each day we will begin our meeting by greeting each other. Watch me and see how much you can notice about my greeting." I turn to Nate, a few students to my right. "Good Morning, Nate." I speak clearly and smile at Nate. "What did you notice?"

"You turned yourself towards Nate."

"You smiled at him."

"You said the name he likes, not his whole name."

"What about the way I said the words?" I prod.

"You said them clearly."

“And you used a cheerful voice.”

We go around the circle, exchanging clear and upbeat “Good Mornings,” each child named in a welcoming way. We will repeat the same straightforward greeting for the rest of the week, allowing the focus to be on the naming and the tone.

Summer souvenir sharing

I build a sharing component into Morning Meeting from the first day, though the sharing this week is based on teacher-assigned topics. The first day we will share some of our results from the scavenger hunt just completed. We’ll go through the list of items on the scavenger hunt form and have two or three children name whom they found for each item. Then all those to whom that item applies (such as “was born in another state”) raise their hands.

On subsequent days, a few students each day will show the summer souvenir they selected to bring in, telling classmates how it represents a part of their summer. We will discuss, model, and practice clear, audible speaking voices and attentive and caring listening behaviors. While this is more open-ended than Day One’s sharing, it is still based upon a tangible object, reducing the anxiety of speaking to the whole class without a “prop.” The postcards, seashells, camp-crafted art projects, and interesting rocks provide us with glimpses into safe and preselected aspects of each other’s out-of-school lives.

News and announcements chart

Beginning on the second day of school, I prepare a chart with some news and announcements about our day and an interactive section that requires students’ response. I place the chart prominently inside the classroom door and let students know that it is their responsibility to read the chart before Morning Meeting each day. I move the chart into our circle at Morning Meeting time, when we will refer to it.

The chart message on the second day might read as shown on the next page.

Week One

**Middle
Grades
(3-4)**

**Community
Building and
Tone Setting**

9-6-00	
<u>Good Second Morning!</u>	
At Morning Meeting the following people will share their summer souvenirs:	
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
We will begin using reading logs and we will also learn some fun new math games.	
Can you find answers to the following questions:	
<input type="checkbox"/> Who spent a month in Florida with her grandmother this summer?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Who says pizza is their favorite food?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Who has a two-week-old baby sister?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Who went to school in Montana last year?	

*Sample Morning Message Chart
Middle Grades, Day Two*

Reflection and Friday closing circle

We will pause often to reflect upon things we have learned, behaviors that are serving us well, and those that aren't. Questions such as "What made our tag game feel fun and friendly today?" or "What made the 'Four-Square' game fall apart at recess?" serve as quick, frequent check-ins and will become a part of the fabric of our class.

Each Friday, we will have a closing circle, a more formal and lengthier reflection time, ending our week together in a calm and thoughtful way. First, we go around the circle, each person sharing something she/he feels proud of from the week that is ending. Then we share a few moments of silent reflection, during which we each compose a wish. These wishes are not for sharing; they simply end the week with a sense of looking ahead with hope. Students whisper their wishes into their cupped hands, and at a signal from me when I note that all are ready, we uncup our hands, releasing these wishes into the air. This small, simple ceremony acknowledges that students' hopes and wishes are a part of our classroom.

Rules and Routines

Teaching basic signals

Before the first Morning Meeting, students need to learn a few procedures and expectations for getting from a noisy activity to a quiet meeting. I circulate among the students, who are engaged in the scavenger hunt, telling them it's time to stop and "freeze." Slowly the room quiets. At that point I show them the chime which I will use as a signal for quiet attention.

We practice freezing. Making it playful, I announce, "Your job is to move around, talk to the people next to you, and ignore me. When the chime rings, I will start counting. Let's see how quickly you can freeze and show you are listening." After a couple of tries, each one a bit shorter than the last, I pronounce it a great "Day One Time" and write it on the chalkboard with a flourish. We will see how many seconds we can cut by the week's end.

Transition time

"We will need to get to meetings safely and efficiently," I announce. "Who can define 'efficiently'?"

After hearing a few ideas, I model the way I want students to come to Morning Meeting and ask a few students to model it, too. "What did you notice about the way Jamie came to the meeting area?" I ask.

"He put his paper in his cubby on the way."

"He didn't stop to talk to anyone. He just did it."

"When he bumped into Todd, he said 'Sorry.'"

If moving chairs into a circle is necessary for meeting set-up, I model and ask volunteers to demonstrate ways to make this move quick, calm, and safe. Once the children have noted and practiced the behaviors for a safe and efficient transition, I'll signal that it's time for all of us to come to Morning Meeting. We'll practice two or three times if necessary for it to go smoothly.

I will use this same approach of naming my expectations and eliciting from students exactly what each behavior looks and sounds like to teach lining up, walking through the halls, circling up, and lots of other basic procedures these first days. I keep the process engaging by interspersing the learning and practicing of routines with more spontaneous and active pursuits and by using a playful approach to the learning of routines. Students especially enjoy timing themselves and rating themselves on various scales, for example.

Week One

**Middle
Grades
(3-4)**

Format for work-sharing

In this first week, I give students a specific prompt to focus their sharing or presenting of their work. "Show us your symbol and tell us what it represents," I might say when students are sharing the symbols of their hopes and dreams. Later in the year, work-sharing will be more open-ended, and the audience will be required to ask questions and make comments about the work. For now, we will focus on developing clear, confident presentation skills and attentive listening habits. At the end of each sharing session, we recognize the sharing by a round of applause for those who shared that day.

Outside Time

Rules and Routines

Circling up

Outside Time

Before we go outside to begin group games, I instruct students that when they get out to the playing area, they are to hold hands and make a circle. I want them to be able to quickly assemble themselves so that I can make sure all are there and give instructions. It is a group management technique that is vital on the playground or on field trips.

The children's first attempt will very likely be clumsy and uneven. Some may be swinging arms vigorously, pulling the circle out of shape; some will not want to hold hands with the person next to them; some will be trying to insinuate themselves into the circle near their best friend. I coach and direct until a circle of attentive children has formed. "A good start, but it took a long time. Let's try again, and this time I will count. Spread out, talk, run around, and when you hear 'Circle up!' let's see how quickly you can do it on your own this time."

Choosing games

For the first week I choose games that are familiar to most children this age. I select games with simple rules, games that get everyone moving but do not highlight individual prowess. Tag games, with their infinite variations, work well. Before we begin tag games, we review and demonstrate "safe tagging," and I remind them of the "tagger's choice" rule used in our school: If the tagger says she tagged you, you've been tagged. No arguing, no putting down. This eliminates the squabbling that stems from tagging disputes, often undermining the fun.

Guided Discoveries

Basic materials

This week we will do many guided discoveries of basic supplies: crayons, markers, and colored pencils; multilink cubes, pattern blocks, and Cuisenaire® rods; math games like Yahtzee®, Dominoes®, and Krypto®.

We will continue to get to know each other as we begin to review, develop, and assess our basic skills. Introducing materials we will use in reading, writing, math, and art allows the children to begin work in a reassuringly successful manner. Listening to each other's ideas and watching each other use these materials expand the children's repertoire of techniques. Guided discoveries also ensure that students understand the expectations for getting and putting away materials.

Teacher observation

As the children work on the open-ended explorations of guided discoveries, I watch closely. I comment to reinforce the positive ways they work together: "You are remembering to make sure all the caps are back on the markers," or "You are waiting your turn for the turquoise marker so politely."

I remind and redirect when I see that they need help to be successful: "Show me, Douglas. How can you throw the dice so that they don't roll off the table?" To an impulsive grabber: "Wait, Liz. If you want to use the green hexagon that Stevie has, how can you ask politely?"

I learn vital information about each child by watching. I learn about their reading abilities, listening skills, independence, spelling, handwriting, vocabulary, written expression, and problem-solving skills. A central goal of the first few weeks of school is to assess the knowledge students bring so that I know where to begin and what to emphasize in the coming year. Guided discoveries are among the best ways to do this.

Guided discovery of a learning process

I will use the guided discovery strategy to explore processes in several academic areas this week: how to choose a book from the classroom library for independent reading; how to choose a topic and begin work during writing time; how to play the math games available during activity time.

For example, I might begin our explorations of writing by asking, "What are some reasons people write?"

Week One

**Middle
Grades
(3-4)**

“People write to say things to other people they can’t just talk to, like letters and e-mails to relatives far away.”

“My mom writes me and my dad a note each morning, because she has to go to work at the hospital early.”

“Sometimes people write directions about how to fix things. Like somebody wrote the instruction manual that came with my new bike.”

“Sometimes people write down stories that happened to them because they don’t want to forget them or they want other people to know about what happened.”

“Or they make up stories that they think people will be interested in.”

“What a good list,” I acknowledge, recording each idea on chart paper as we go around the circle. “You have named a lot of reasons people might write and a lot of kinds of writing they do. This year we will do lots of different kinds of writing during writing time.” We will continue this conversation by listing different genres we might try—plays, stories, letters, autobiography, and poems—and specific topics to write about.

“I will expect you to find a place and bring all that you need so that you can write by yourself for twenty minutes today.” We will talk about what that looks like—and then what it doesn’t look like. They smile in recognition as I model an unprepared student, jumping up and down to get a drink of water, sharpen a pencil, crumple and throw away a sheet of paper.

Some of them will struggle to sit in one place and focus for twenty minutes; others plunge in and could write with pleasure for twice that long. Some produce a few tortured sentence fragments; others are on to page two at the end of the writing time. I watch, noting those whom I will check in with first thing tomorrow.

Hopes and Dreams

Beginning discussion

We begin thinking about our hopes and dreams for the school year after we have had some time to get to know each other and do some things together. The depth and honesty of sharing increases as the children have more of a sense of what school will be like this year, and an initial sense of community has developed.

On the afternoon of Day Two, I begin our discussion by sharing my own hopes for our year together, and by telling a brief story of a child I taught in the

Guided Discoveries

Hopes and Dreams

Chapter One

past. “I remember Charlie, a student who wanted to feel like a better mathematician. He planned to remind himself when he got a wrong answer that mistakes didn’t mean he was stupid; they meant he was learning. By the end of the year, he enjoyed math more and had learned many new skills, like division and two-digit multiplication.”

Pair-share

As a class we do some initial brainstorming of what our hopes and dreams might be. I want to engage the children’s thinking, but I do not want them to commit to final goals until they have had a chance to reflect more deeply, increasing the quality and usefulness of the goals they choose. Individually, children fill out a worksheet to guide their thinking, then share it with a partner (see sample worksheet on the next page). The partner conversations help children develop their thinking through verbalizing their ideas and listening to the ideas of another.

A lesson on symbols

On Day Three, we continue the process by beginning with a lesson on symbols, a concept I know we will be using in our work with mapping as well as in math and language arts this year. We define the word “symbol” and list some of the symbols we encounter in our daily lives—road signs, logos, no smoking signs.

Next, we brainstorm several ways to symbolize ideas such as “reading,” “hard work,” and “friendship.” Several students share their most important hope for this year, as developed on their worksheet the day before, and possible symbols they might use to represent this hope. Then each child develops a symbol for his/her most important hope and creates a final draft of it on a precut square of drawing paper. Children present these symbols to the class on Day Four. We then organize them into a “patchwork quilt,” which gets displayed on the wall.

Creating general rules

As students think about their hopes and dreams for the school year, they build an awareness and knowledge of one another. Our community is growing.

Once we have a firm base of shared experiences and a fledgling but sturdy sense of trust and friendship, I begin the process of creating general rules with the class. I have planned to begin this process on Day Five, but I will do so only if my basic goals for the first week of school have been met.

Week One

**Middle
Grades
(3–4)**

My Hopes and Dreams Study Sheet

Name _____ Date _____

Last year in school my favorite thing to do was _____

_____.

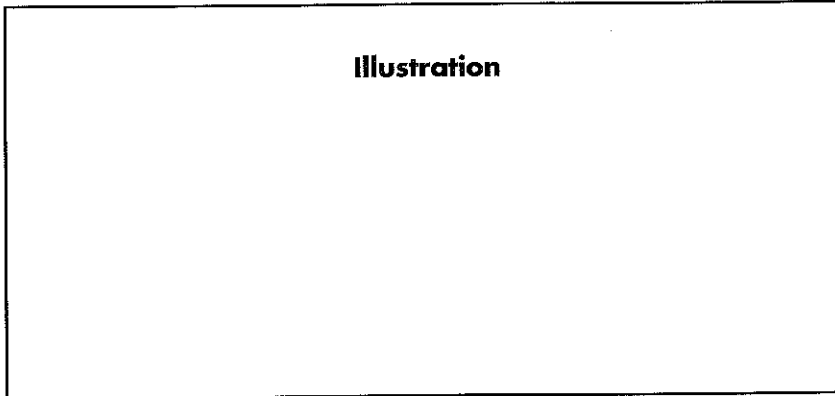
The hardest thing for me about school last year was _____

_____.

If I could change anything about what I did last year, I would _____

_____.

Hopes and
Dreams



This year I am really looking forward to _____

_____.

I am a little worried about _____

_____.

Chapter One

Our first meeting about rules begins with reviewing our individual hopes and goals. “If these are our hopes and our dreams, what do you suppose are the rules we will need in our classroom to help us make these hopes and dreams come true?” First ideas are often expressed in the negative: “Don’t fight. Don’t interrupt.” After listing these, I help students to express these ideas positively: “So, if we aren’t going to fight, what will we do when we have a conflict?”

We end this first meeting by starting to categorize the items on what is often a lengthy list, ranging from grand concepts (“People should be nice to each other”) to smaller details (“Talk in a quiet voice during work times”). Our goal is eventually to have three to six general rules upon which the class agrees.

Homework

I find that third- and fourth-graders are very eager for homework this first week. It gives them a way to share their school day with family and to parade their new, advanced grade level.

I keep the homework simple to assure maximum success for all, and I give assignments that literally connect home lives to school. I do hold the students accountable for their homework, checking as they come in to make sure they have done the assignments. I want them to develop good homework habits from the outset, and to understand that homework is never just busywork but is essential to class participation. See Appendix B for further information on introducing homework during the first six weeks of school.

Week One

Middle Grades (3-4)