

FOR STUDENTS' SAKE

IDEAS FOR COMMUNICATING AND PARTNERING WITH PARENTS

Communication and trust help to set the foundation of student success. Yet, connecting with parents can be a challenge for many educators. But there are ways you can increase parent involvement, build meaningful parent-teacher partnerships, and stay connected long after hosting your first Back to School Night!

When parents don't return your phone calls, try text and email to quickly update parents, or let them know when their student has done a great job or been helpful in class.

Other Ideas:

- Get students to keep parents informed. Have them write and produce a print or online newsletter about classroom milestones, activities, and events. Be sure to include your contact information and any important dates or notifications.
- Get to know your students. In the first week of school, send home a fill-in-the-blank letter in English and Spanish (and in other languages as needed) for parents to write to you about their son's and/or daughter's—strengths and weaknesses, hobbies and interests, and expectations for learning in the classroom.
- Invite students to attend parent conferences. Many educators find it helpful and use the opportunity to have the student included in parent/teacher discussions about their class behavior and performance.
- Realize that while some immigrant parents are eager to get involved in school, they may not understand the American system, feel welcome, or may feel uncomfortable about their ability to communicate in English. Even if your school doesn't have a dedicated Parent Resource Center, draw in and support the entire family unit at school. Use an informal after-school ESL



course to bring students and parents into the classroom; or launch a series of classes and workshops to introduce immigrant parents to each other, to teachers, and to strategies for helping their children navigate the P-12 school system.

- Struggling to reach parents who can't take time off during the day, work nights, or are scared of the school? Make visits to homes an option. It may require some training, teaming up with another school staff member, and even stepping out of your comfort zone, but through home visits, you may learn a bit more about the lives of your students and their families. Some quick tips: Offer alternative times—few parents will say no if you're flexible; and if parents are uncomfortable inviting you into their home, meet at a coffee shop, a library, or even a park.
- Try some creative community building among parents and families and your school. Tap into the power of your school's PTA. Find parent volunteers willing to offer rides to parents without transportation so they can attend parent conferences and school events. Providing childcare at school during parent conferences and meetings may also draw in parents who otherwise couldn't participate.



A GUIDE FOR TOMORROW'S TEACHERS

GET PRACTICAL

HOW TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS, ORGANIZE YOUR FIRST CLASSROOM, COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS, AND BUILD YOUR WINNING TEAM

5 QUESTIONS EVERY NEW TEACHER SHOULD ASK

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF EDUCATION We're not going to fool you. Teaching is tough—especially during the first year. Fortunately, you will probably get a mentor who will help guide you. But you must ask questions along the way. Special education teacher Melissa Lavell says she was reluctant to ask questions as a new teacher because she didn't want to appear incompetent. "Luckily," she says, "there are no stupid questions and the answers I received have helped me." Below, are some of the things Lavell says she would have asked—before she got "distracted by bulletin boards, classroom organization, and Sharpie markers"—during her first 180 days as a special education teacher.

1 Who are my union reps? The representatives in your building are knowledgeable about school and district procedures. These are the people to go to if you have questions about health care coverage, maternity leave, retirement plans, and any other workplace issues covered by your union contract.

2 What supplies do I need? Some school districts give teachers a small annual budget for classrooms. Still, teachers put a cumulative \$1.6 billion of their own money toward classroom supplies and instructional materials each year. Use your allocated funds wisely. Maximize resources by teaming up with colleagues who teach the same subjects as you, and may have extra supplies to share. When placing your supply order, start with the big ticket items that you'd rather not spend your own money on and work your way down. When your funds run out, head to discount stores.

3 What is the best way to communicate with parents? Phone calls are usually the best way to reach your students' parents; this kind of communication is more personal and the tone of the conversation is less likely to be misconstrued. But given both parents' and teachers' busy work schedules, a quick email can be just as effective. Whichever method of communication you choose, remember to start and end with a positive comment about your student.

4 How do I accommodate children with special needs? Even if your degree is not in special education, at some point your classroom will include one or more students with special needs. Consider taking a class on children with disabilities



Melissa Lavell (left) and co-teacher Ashlee-Nichole Skiles lead students in acting out parts of an essay in a literacy class.

or autism. Educate yourself on the laws, language, and latest literature from the field, and consult your school's special education teachers. And remember to always use person-first language during discussions: she is "a student with autism," not she is "an autistic student."

5 How do I avoid burnout? As a first-year teacher trying to keep your head above water, it can be easy to put your health and well-being (and social life) on the back burner. That's why I spent my first year rediscovering my love for yoga. It relieved my stress and anxieties, and I found ways to incorporate yoga in the classroom to help my students relieve their stress and anxieties.

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DESIGN & DIY FOR YOUR FIRST CLASSROOM



WHETHER YOU ARE A DECORATING DIVA OR A DIY NOVICE, you can easily turn your first classroom into a learning environment that's inspirational and fun—even if your budget is small. Start dreaming and planning. Design help and crafty tips from fellow members are here!

1 Enlist Helpers. Karla Nalepa, first-grade teacher at Hartville Elementary School snagged family members and friends to help her outfit the old drab classroom she inherited. They painted walls and sewed cushions, curtains and pillows for the whimsical reading nooks she set up throughout the room. Check in with your family and friends, and if you don't find a handy helper, ask them to donate educational materials and supplies or gift cards to discount stores.

2 Get Crafty. Fabric is more durable and versatile than paper. Use it to cover, personalize and decorate things like bulletin boards and your teacher's desk. Adhesive strips, staples, or a hot glue gun can hold most fabrics in place. Heather Freeman, a sixth-grade communications and arts teacher at Pershing Middle School turned fabric, batting, spray paint, and wooden electrical spools into sturdy, colorful seating for her students' reading nook. For this and other crafty classroom ideas visit Freeman's blog, thelovelycupboard.com.

3 Snag Free Stuff. When it comes to offers of free supplies, materials, or equipment, Bridget Lockhart, an English teacher at Rancho Alamitos High School, says just say "Yes." Many freebies can become classroom treasures. For a few cents and some brightly colored duct tape, Lockhart says discarded magazine holders can become sleek, modern organizers. Spray paint and

stencils can turn a tossed-out metal cabinet into a stylish bookcase. Strips of electrical tape can add organization to an average white board. Create sections to showcase homework assignments, school events, vocabulary words of the week, and more.

4 Build Community. Jennifer Larson, a first-grade teacher in Virginia's Alexandria City Public Schools, believes in building community in the classroom, something that impacts her layout and design. In her room, learning takes place in centers and students rotate through them. Instead of individual desks, Lawson organizes students in groups at tables, with a common supply box for each table. She also labels everything in the room. Pictures are placed on objects to help English language learners and students who are still learning to read. "When the students are ready, they will begin to connect the words to the pictures. If they are not ready, they have the visual support they need," Lawson says.

5 Think Children. When it comes to setting up her classroom, Kit Noonan, a kindergarten teacher at Carderock Springs Elementary School in Bethesda, Md. simply "thinks like children." That means outfitting a "friendly, comfortable, warm, and inviting" space. Placement is a factor, too. "Anything I want them to notice is three feet from the floor or lower. They each have a seat, but otherwise, they should feel safe and comfortable anywhere in the classroom. I try to give them as much control over their environment as possible."

For more advice on classroom decorating and organizing, visit NEA Today on Pinterest at [pinterest.com/NEAToday](https://www.pinterest.com/NEAToday).

FORM YOUR WINNING TEAM!

Everyone wants to be on—or build—a winning team. In addition to fellow teachers and administrators, recruit education support professionals (ESPs) for your team. They're the approximately 3 million education professionals—about 500,000 of them are NEA members—who often work behind the scenes to support students and teachers and help schools run smoothly. ESPs are school **secretaries, custodians, technical staff, security officers, bus drivers, food service workers**, and those who work in **health and student services. Paraeducators** are also ESPs. They work alongside teachers, and can oversee your small student groups and provide one-on-one instruction. In particular, you should get to know the paraeducators with training in special education and ELL.

INVITE THESE ESPs TO JOIN YOUR TEAM:

FOOD SERVICE WORKERS Want to give your students a tour of the school's kitchen? Let these staff be your guide. Maybe you want to plant a student garden? Food service workers make good partners for this activity, too. And some are dieticians who can provide your students with informal lessons on nutrition and health.

TECHNICIANS These audiovisual, electrical, data processing specialists are good to know when you need to install, repair, and upgrade your computer or your classroom's network.

NURSES Some school nurses are ESPs. Partner with them to stay informed about the medical conditions of particular students as well as about viruses or other health concerns that may impact the neighborhood or school. Looking for health speakers? Invite them to class for informal talks with students that encourage them to maintain good health independently.

CUSTODIANS Befriend the school custodian who can help set up your classroom—move furniture and boxes, hang pictures, wax the floor, or even make heating and air system repairs. At some schools, students can earn academic or community service credit by working with the head custodian on campus maintenance jobs. As their teacher, you may be asked to act as a liaison.

"Students couldn't function if we didn't deliver them to school safely, if they weren't fed, if they weren't able to check out library books, if we didn't have a nurse to take care of them. We connect with the students as much as the teachers do."

—PAULA MONROE, NEA'S 2014 EDUCATION SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL OF THE YEAR AND A SECRETARY (NOW RETIRED) IN CALIFORNIA'S REDLANDS UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT.

SECRETARIES They're your go-to source for sound insider advice and administrative information about your school and school district processes. Rely on them to promptly deliver messages from parents. Secretaries can usually respond to questions about salary, holiday breaks, vacation rules, board meetings, and more. Of course, new teachers can get some of this information from veteran teachers, but when school administrative culture or policies and rules change, school secretaries are often the first to know.

LIBRARIANS Some librarians are considered ESPs. They can help with coordinating book selections and lesson plans for your students.

BUS DRIVERS Although their schedules normally keep them from interacting with teachers during the day, get to know your school's bus drivers. As the first school employees to greet your students in the morning, and the last to see them at the end of the day, bus drivers are your extra eyes and ears when it comes to your students' health and safety. For safety and emergency reasons, consider getting the bus driver's name and cell phone and bus number.

Learn more about ESPs, visit nea.org/esp.