

## Chapter 9: The First Week of School

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*“Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.”*

-Abraham Lincoln

My first year of teaching was, by far, the most difficult year of my life. At first I felt scared, then I felt overwhelmed, then I felt joy of a long Christmas break, then I felt I was hopping from one weekend to the next trying to catch my breath, and then ended the year exhausted.

I loved my students, but there was one challenging student who made teaching difficult. JD seemed as if his whole existence was meant to derail my lessons and ensure that learning was kept to a minimum.

On one particularly memorable Tuesday in February JD sauntered into the 6th grade hallway. I got to start my day with him in both my homeroom and 1st period. I saw him and my chest tightened a bit because just looking at the smirk on his little face, I knew today was going to be a rough day. He was rowdy before he even entered the classroom, laughing maniacally, clomping around in his oversized cowboy boots and tracking mud throughout the building with every dragging step. He was intentionally making as much noise as possible by combining his vocal strength with the stomping of his tiny feet.

He greeted me with a “Good morning Ms. Workman” which stank of insubordination. I replied in as pleasant a voice I could muster, “Good morning, JD. Are we going to have a good day today?” He just continued smiling as he walked by. I mentally braced myself for the 65 minutes (3,900 seconds) to come.

Oddly enough, JD walked over to his seat in the back corner (as far from me as possible) and just sat there. I was glad he wasn’t being a disruption so I didn’t bother making him get paper and a pencil. Little did I know, this was the calm before the storm.

On this particular day, we were learning about the major beliefs of Christianity. About 20 minutes into class when the students were independently reading about what Christians believe about the love of Jesus, JD decided it was time for his show. He looked at his best friend who sat in the other back corner of the classroom and smiled. I knew something was about to go down.

JD got out of his seat and began traversing the aisles in search of a pencil. On this journey, he stopped to talk to every child. “Do you have a pencil? Do you have a pencil? Do you have some paper?” I walked over to JD and gave him both paper and a pencil and told him to return to his seat, but the show was only just beginning. Instead of clomping back to his seat as I hoped against hope he would do, he continued to walk up and down the aisles. This time, he wasn’t asking for any supplies. Rather, he was on a

mission to intentionally irritate his classmates. He walked by TB's desk and slid her paper onto the floor. I told him to sit down. He walked next to DB's desk and kicked his backpack. I told him to sit down. He walked over to LB's desk and smacked him in the back of the head. At this point, I walked over to JD, got very close to him and told him as forcefully yet quietly, "Sit down." JD laughed and began clomping back to his seat. I thought the incident was over. If only.

On his way back to his seat, he couldn't help himself and he grabbed RR's backpack. JD knew what he was doing. He knew RR, a particularly volatile young lady, would give him the scene he so desperately wanted. RR stood up and started screaming. "Get away from me! You are disgusting! I hate you!" I swear JD smiled as he screamed back at her.

I knew I had completely lost control of the situation, so I had to call in backup. I texted the 6'3" assistant principal/football coach, "JD and RR are screaming at each other."

He was there throwing open the door within 30 seconds. He yelled, "JD! What have I told you about acting up in class!" As soon as JD heard Coach's voice he stopped yelling, his face went pale, and for the first time all day he stopped smirking.

JD began stammering, "But, I wasn't even doing anything and..." Coach interrupted him and said, "Class, was JD doing anything?" The entire class chimed in all at once, "Yea, he was walking around," "He grabbed my backpack," "He smacked me in the head," "He didn't listen to the teacher," rattling JD out without a second thought.

As soon as Coach opened his mouth again, the class silenced. Coach said, "Don't lie to me JD, I always find the truth." Coach then walked JD out of my classroom, told me to write a referral, and class was calm and could go back to learning about the love of Jesus.

JD, The child I dreaded seeing, who caused my body to shudder and who I wished was suspended every single day, never did anything so ostentatiously terrible. Instead, he consistently tested my rules, pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable, and was a general disruption. JD exposed every single nerve in my body and tapped danced on them with metal cleats. He found every crack in my management plan and took every opportunity to exploit any deficiency in my planning. He wore me down over the course of the 180 long and often frustrating days of my first year.

The only person who could control JD's behavior in my classroom was Coach. JD respected Coach, but he did not respect me. Why? Was it because Coach was a 6'3" man and I was a 5'5" woman? That may have played a part, but height and gender were not the only problems. Coach made JD listen from the very first day of school, I did not.

I did not dislike JD in the first week of school, though that is when I identified his irritating behaviors. Instead of stopping his small irritating behaviors during the first

week of school, I let them slide. Unfortunately, after months of small irritating behaviors every single day, I realized I had begun to feel animosity toward JD. By the time I realized how much of a reaction he could generate from me, it was too late. I did a poor job identifying and prohibiting his disruptive behaviors the first week of school, so by February the small irritations had become large disruptions that derailed learning during first period every day.

Unlike me, Coach never let JD slide. Coach knew JD would be a problem if he allowed him to get away with any little thing, so Coach did not allow JD to have free reign. As a result, by February when I had no control over JD, Coach could get JD to do whatever he needed, usually by simply yelling his name.

No teacher sets out despising the children they are trying to teach. A big part of making sure you don't follow the same path I did is to prepare yourself for the first week of school. The first week of school is, bar none, the most important week of the school year.

### **Where to begin?**

The purpose of the first week of school is to set up an environment where the children can learn. The first week builds the foundation of your classroom for the next 180 days.

Building a solid foundation begins with planning out exactly the way your class is going to run before any student ever shows up. You will want to spend a lot of time before school begins thinking seriously about what students will do in your class and what they will not do in your class. You want to build a classroom climate that mainstreams learning (or more on creating a classroom climate, see chapter 10).

My advice is to first prioritize rules, procedures, and consequences. In order to build a good year, you need to have good rules that you are willing to enforce with reasonable consequences. You can have the best rules in the world, but if there is no enforcement of the rules you will end up with a JD derailing your class every day. Do the work up front before school even starts and you will be off to a good start managing the JDs of the world. For more on building rules and procedures refer to chapter 6.

### **Over-prepare**

I threw up the morning I began teaching. I threw up twice. Every year the first day is terrifying. It produces anxiety in even the most experienced teachers. A friend of mine has been teaching for 10 years and she still freaks out a little before the first day of school. It is normal to be anxious/terrified. Call your mom. Cry. Call your mom crying. It doesn't matter what you do, as long as you don't do it in front of the kids.

One thing that helps alleviate first day anxiety is to be over-prepared. Have everything ready before you show up to school on the first day. Have your copies and

slideshow ready. Make sure your room is set up. Make sure your classroom looks like it is fully formed and ready to welcome students. If you need to, write a script for what you will say. At the very least have a detailed schedule you can use as a checklist. One important thing about teaching is to make sure you say and do the same things to each period.

Preparing for the first day of school can be tough especially if your school is not prepared. Student schedules, bell schedules, lunches, buses, and any other thing imaginable might be a trainwreck the first day of school, but your classroom should not be a trainwreck. Control what you can control. Be prepared for students who come in late, students who are suddenly pulled out of class, and a bell schedule that may not give equal time to each period. Be prepared to possibly have the same students for a long period of time (some schools have stayed in homeroom for days because schedules are not ready). Being over-prepared can help salvage your day even if the school as a whole is a trainwreck. Teach the children something, enforce your rules, and your first day will be fine.

### **Prepare your mind**

I remember watching the 2018 Winter Olympics and Lindsey Vonn was getting ready to ski down the hill when the camera zoomed in on her. She was at the top of the hill rocking back and forth and making funny faces, audibly swishing the whole time. What on earth was she doing? Why is she taking away time from ice skating with her stupid swishing? Just ski down the hill so I can watch ice dancing! Even though she took screen time away from ice dancing (the best sport ever), she was preparing for her run in the best way possible. Instead of just hopping up to the start and skiing down the hill, she took time to mentally go through her run by imagining all the twists and turns, feeling the bumps, and envisioning herself crossing the finish line.

That's how I prepare for the first day of school. True, Lindsey Vonn is a professional athlete, but we are similar because we both have to fight a battle every day. Vonn's challenge is a literal mountain, while a teacher's challenge is full of figurative mountains.

The night before the first day of school I envision my success; how I deal with obstacles and how I feel when I cross the finish line. I envision all the little children with their eager yet scared faces as they enter middle school for the first time. I envision introducing myself as likable, but serious. I envision a student trying to push back against the rules and myself putting them in their place in an appropriate manner. No matter what happens, my reaction will have the appearance of "I expected this to happen." Finally, I envision the feeling of success I have as I plop into my desk chair at the end of the day knowing I made it through the first day and although it wasn't perfect, it was exactly what it needed to be.

Getting into a mindset of success will help you make success a reality. When you are teaching, your success depends on you and the way you run your classroom. Prepare for it like an Olympic champion.

## **First day**

The day has arrived. You have prepared, you have envisioned your success, and you are ready to rock and roll. Here is a list of “dos and don’ts.”

### **1. Don’t Talk the Whole Time**

When I was in school, the first day was just the teachers talking for the entire period about their expectations, semester assignments, and a whole lot of other boring stuff no one cared about or paid attention to. Your experience as a student should not be the basis for your approach to the first day.

Instead of sending the students into a vegetative state where no brain function occurs, make the students work. I like to start out with my introduction. The children get three things: “My name is Ms. Workman, I am from Delaware, and I coach girls basketball.” Then I give them an assignment. I don’t tell them my whole life story, I don’t tell them why I coach basketball, I don’t tell them what kind of music I listen to, I don’t even tell them my first name. These are things they will learn over the next 179 days.

First day of school you need to teach rules and procedures. Your first goal is to get them working as soon as possible. I recommend not telling the students any of your rules and procedures. Instead, have them read and answer questions about your rules and the five most important procedures.

The main reason I give the students an assignment on the first day is because it sets a tone of work for my class. I want the students to know they will be learning and working every day in 6th grade Social Studies. If I had a dollar for every time a child asked me, “When are we gonna have a free day?,” I would be teaching as a hobby, not a job. Starting the year with work takes the spotlight off of you and puts it onto them. In addition, it gives them an opportunity to begin the year with something you grade. Since you haven’t taught them much yet, there’s a good chance for them to do well on the assignment.

Another goal for the first day of school is to impress upon them how serious you are about their education. You don’t need to go over all the procedures to accomplish this task. Going over the rules, enforcing the rules with consequences, and letting the children know how much work they will be doing does more to prepare the students than talking at them all day.

### **2. Address the Little Things**

Students will test your rules. It may happen in the first five minutes or it may happen during the second day. Sometimes they will test your rules before you even tell them what your rules are. There is no grace or mercy on the first day of school. Remember JD? I vividly remember our first day of school. He wasn't there. He did not feel the need to show up until the second week of school after I had already gone over the rules and procedures. However, I do remember his first day. He got out of his seat and I told him to sit down. He got out of his seat again and I told him to sit down again. He received no consequence for breaking the rule other than my verbal request. I was unable to address the issue on day one, and by February he was still getting up, because I allowed this to become the norm.

At the beginning of the year it is essential that you are strict and implement the consequences as fairly as humanly possible. If you let a student get away with talking to their neighbor, but you pounce on another student for the same thing, the children will perceive you as unfair and gaining their continued respect will be increasingly difficult. At the same time, it is up to you to decide what is fair and consistent. No matter what you do, there will inevitably be students who see everything you do as unfair.

While being strict is essential, be careful not to be the crazy mean teacher. Yes, you want to lay down the law, but you don't want to be perceived as cruel and unfair. If their behaviors can elicit an emotional response from you, this becomes an opportunity to play the game of "who can make the teacher angry/upset/cry today?" It's a game the teacher cannot win. If you start the year out screaming at children they may be quiet for a moment and fear you, but they will not respect you. You don't want fear. As Master Yoda says, "Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering." No one wants to suffer, so instead of being cruel and unfair be strict and consistent. Consistency, both in emotional response and in addressing behaviors, is how you earn respect.

Consistency comes when you give children consequences for breaking rules. Even if it was an accident, give the consequence. I teach 6th grade and apparently at the elementary school, the students do not need to raise their hands. In my class, the students absolutely need to raise their hands or else I will lose my mind.. My first year I did not do a good job of enforcing this procedure. I thought, 'They are just so excited to learn and share their ideas. How can I punish them for participating in class?' This went downhill fast, because once they started blurting out without consequence, it became the norm. Once I tried to break this norm, they called me out for being inconsistent.

That was year one. Year two was infinitely better. I realized that if I was going to have a class still learning in February, I needed to be strict and consistent in August. I did my best. Still, I had one period of students who just did not seem able to raise their hands. I gave them a consequence every time. By the end of the first two weeks, they were (mostly) raising their hands in order to get permission to speak. By April, they were

still raising their hands in order to get permission to speak. I have no idea what April would have been like if I had not enforced the hand-raising rule in August.

In addition to rules, enforcing procedures at the beginning is worth the initial struggle. The purpose of procedures is to make the class run as efficiently as possible. Unfortunately, procedures do not make the class more efficient if the children cannot do them correctly.

On the first day of school I wish I had forced the students to pass their papers in correctly. In an ideal world, the children would calmly pass their papers towards the front of their row after they had received the paper from their classmates who sat behind them. Within 20 seconds, the papers should be at the front of each row in a nice neat stack. The students have problems with every single part of that procedure. Passing in papers can easily slip into a 3 minute production of children hitting each other with papers, yelling at their neighbor, and, occasionally, getting their papers to the front in a blob that vaguely resembles a stack.

What I understood to be a simple procedure turned out to not be simple. Unfortunately, it would be unfair for me to yell at them when I have never once made them pass in papers correctly. First, you have to understand that your students may not see procedures as a way to promote efficiency and order. With passing in papers, the goal for me is to have them do it quickly so that all the papers are in a neat stack and we can move onto the next activity. For students, they see this as an opportunity to interact with their classmates. The more they drag it out, the more time they have to interact.

So then how can you blend the two goals? Be sure to remind them that as soon as the papers are passed in, we can move onto the next fun activity (which may involve interacting with your classmates). Use a timer and make it a contest (Which period can have the quickest, safest paper pass-up time?). Another option is to have students turn in their work when they exit the room. Whatever you do, make sure you consider your goals and how you can align them with your students' goals.

### **3. Have a Seating Chart**

The first day is often a day for testing boundaries and seeing which teachers are actually serious. Assigning seats gives the impression that you are serious. It also sets you up as the leader of the classroom because you have control over their first moves in your class.

Having a seating chart isn't just a power move, it also helps you learn names. There is no way on earth you will be able to learn 20-30 names per period (150 in one day) and put them with the correct faces the first time you meet each student in each class. Seating charts give you access to their name whenever you want or need it



because if you know where a student sits, it is easy to find their name on the seating chart.

Names are powerful. Students can't hide behind anonymity if you know their names. There is no better feeling than calling out a student by name on the first day of school because they aren't acting right. Instead of, "hey, you, stop talking. No, not you, you. What's your name again?" You can say, "JD stop talking."

I like to number the seats and greet the children at the door. They tell me their names, I tell them their seat number. This is a way to get all the students to say their names before I attempt to say them. Also, project the seating chart onto the board. That way, as soon as the students enter, they can look at the board and find their correct seat. If they don't go to the correct seat, you know who the class clowns are already.

#### **4. Keep Your Composure**

Instead, keep cool through all the trials. You may hold your first period for five hours. Keep your cool. A child may cuss you out and storm out of class. Keep your cool. An adult may harass you. Keep your cool. Whatever happens, keep your cool.

Keeping your cool does not mean letting people walk all over you and do whatever they want, but it does mean practicing patience and responding in a professional manner. When you have to hold your first period for 5 hours, keep them under control if not exactly productive. Have activities/games planned for when you have to hold students. If a child cursed you and storms out of your class, notify the office and send a referral. If a colleague harasses you, speak to them in a calm manner, or tell someone you trust. You may want to scream and yell, but to avoid being the crazy, unstable, mean teacher, be the scary calm one.

#### **Rough Start**

It is never too late to recover from a rough start, but no matter what, recovering is more difficult than simply doing it right the first time. The problem with my first year of teaching was that I had a rough start and did not recover. My inability to recover paved the road for JD to shape the classroom climate. Your first day does not have to be perfect, but it needs to be good enough to get your class rolling, preferably in the right direction.

#### **After Day One**

Congrats, you made it. The first day is over, but guess what comes next? The rest of the week. I had no clue what to do after my first day of teaching. Should I keep teaching rules and procedures? Should I start teaching content? Should I set the school on fire so I don't have to go to work? So many valid questions.

I recommend not spending the entire first week on rules and procedures alone. Certainly work on rules and procedures all week and make sure the students are following the rules and doing the procedures correctly, but don't just practice them all week. Instead, choose to teach content while you teach procedures and enforce your rules.

### **Option 1: Quickly Jumping into Content**

Some teachers choose to jump right into their first unit. In my class that would be Ancient Mesopotamia, while in English it might be starting a novel. That is certainly an option. There are a couple benefits to this strategy. First, it continues the tone of work. Students should not feel like they have free time in class and if you start teaching content on the second or third day of school they will certainly feel as though there is no time to goof around. Second, teaching your content early allows you to cover more material which is vital in subjects where there is too much to teach and too little time to teach it. It is typical for several students to not show up the first week of school, so be prepared for this. If you have a student show up in the second week of school and you hand them an entire week of make-up work, then maybe they will decide they need to show up to class. I can't effectively teach about Ancient Mesopotamia if the children missed the entire week about geography, government, and religion.

### **Option 2: Covering the “Why” of the Subject**

The second viable option, and my personal preference, is to begin teaching the why behind your subject. I have it easy, I teach social studies. On the third day of school we talk about what the course titled social studies is and why it is important to study history. We practice procedures as we use them. When we enter class we are practicing the proper procedure, when we pass in papers we are practicing the proper procedure, when we work with partners we are practicing the proper procedure. Honestly, I could go over why we study history in five minutes, but I drag it out for three days to reinforce my rules and show them exactly how we do things in my class. I want the focus of my first week to be following rules and procedures correctly. I mix in the content along with rules and procedures to show the students I am serious about my subject and they should be too.

### **Introduce learning strategies you plan on using**

First week of school is a great time to introduce any learning strategies you will be doing a lot in your class. Introducing these strategies early helps streamline learning for the rest of the year.

During the first week of school I include strategies I use for the entire year. I introduce the way we do vocabulary. I introduce the way we look at graphs. I introduce

the way we look at images. Throughout I am modeling for the students how to do these things. It is exhausting and time consuming, but worth it. My goal after the first few weeks is to have the students do as much work as possible with as little help from me as possible. Introducing strategies early helps prepare them for when we use the same strategies later.

I love partner work, so the first week of class we do partner work while we learn about studying history. I go over in great detail exactly how partner work should go and I actively monitor the students and correct them if they are not following the partner work procedures properly. Partner work means speaking quietly, speaking only to your partner, staying on task, and continuing to follow the rules of the classroom. As soon as a child strays from those rules I quickly correct them.

For example, I see JP turned around talking to CD who is not her partner. I quickly go over and say, "JP, turn around and focus on your work." Usually, the student has no problem turning around and focusing on his work. However, JP is difficult and just adores CD, so two minutes later she is talking to him again. Once again, I will go over and say, "JP, turn around, stop talking to CD and focus on your work. If I have to speak to you again, you will work silently alone." Rarely do I have to make students work alone in the first week because they get with the program after two warnings, but, if JP wants to begin talking to CD again, I will have to move her so she is by herself working alone. I have to enforce my partner work rules because if I don't, by October JP will be yelling across the room to her new crush. Quick enforcement of partner work rules means that usually by the third or fourth time we do partner work in class, the students know exactly what is expected of them and they comply with the rules far more easily.

Don't worry if you don't know of any teaching strategies to use. I had approximately one strategy in my arsenal when I began teaching. Over time, I have learned new strategies and implemented them throughout the year to varying degrees of success. Teaching strategies can be introduced at any time, but if you know in advance some techniques that work well for your class, introduce them quickly to save time later.

## **First Week of School**

If we think of the school year as a house, the first week is the foundation. If the foundation is weak, crooked, or in any way defective, the house will be in constant danger of collapse. If a never-ending storm like JD comes through, your house will come crashing to the ground. Likewise, your first week of school sets the foundation for the rest of the year. No one wants to build on a weak foundation, so make sure you set a strong foundation for the school year by preparing a great classroom and setting up a learning environment where it is possible for students to learn effectively.

In the words of famous newscaster David Brinkley, "A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him." The first week of school, especially as a first year teacher, feels an awful lot like people figuratively throwing bricks at you. What you do with those bricks will determine the success of your classroom and students for the rest of the year. You can dodge, you can duck, and you can do whatever you need to do to avoid the bricks, but avoiding the bricks does not help you build a foundation. Catch the bricks and throw them down. Work hard to build the foundation amongst the chaos and by the time you are putting the roof on the house you don't have to worry about it falling over.

The first week of school is always exhausting, but if you push through, consistently enforce your rules and make sure the students are following your procedures correctly you will set yourself up for a great year where students are able to maximize their learning potential.