

Everything a New Elementary School Teacher **REALLY** Needs to Know

**(But Didn't Learn
in College)**

Otis Kriegel

free spirit
PUBLISHING®

© 2014 Free Spirit Publishing. All rights reserved.

Praise for *Everything a New Elementary School Teacher REALLY Needs to Know*

“Good advice for novice and veteran teachers alike. Whether readers take in the guide from cover to cover or dip in as needed (which will be often), they will leave with a greater sense of confidence.”

—**ForeWord**

“This book is a treasure trove of ‘for real’ tasty tidbits of advice. Kriegel writes well enough to read it through like a novel, but there is so much useful information I have placed it in a handy location, so when a question comes up or a school routine looms ominously in the near future, I can go to the table of contents and use the book like a good old-fashioned Farmers’ Almanac.”

—**Jon Snyder, Dean of the Bank Street College of Education**

“Otis Kriegel is the teacher every parent wants their child to have. For those who care about improving the quality of our schools you simply have to hope that elementary teachers and parents will buy and read this book.”

—**Bob Kerrey, president emeritus, The New School**

“When I first started teaching, I didn’t even know what I didn’t know. I couldn’t figure out why it felt like my students were running the class. How I wish I’d had Otis Kriegel’s book back then! This is an indispensable guide for any teacher, whether they’re just starting out or looking for straight-up, sensible advice on how to improve their classroom and their practice.”

—**Dan Moulthrop, coauthor, with Dave Eggers and Ninive Calegari, of *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America’s Teachers***

“A terrific guide filled with excellent tips and suggestions for new teachers.”

—**Steve Reifman, National Board Certified Teacher and author of *Eight Essentials for Empowered Teaching and Learning, K-8***

“Drawing upon his own years of teaching and reflections on what it means to teach well, Kriegel offers readers a practical, personable road map for how they can become better teachers.”

—**Brad Olsen, associate professor of education, University of California, Santa Cruz, and author of *Teaching What They Learn, Learning What They Live: How Teachers’ Personal Histories Shape Their Professional Development***

“Kriegel’s the hurricane of fresh air that elementary teacher education needs today.”

—**Joseph Patrick Rafter, Ph.D, clinical assistant professor, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University**

“Sweeping and practical guidance to the novice teacher. Through engaging anecdote and lucid reflection, Kriegel draws on his own professional journey in making a vital contribution to the field of teacher education.”

—**Michael Grady, Ed.D., deputy director and clinical assistant professor, Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University**

“A delightful book, chock-full of practical advice for new teachers. Where else will you learn to keep a change of clothes handy (in case a child pees on you) or to tell a parent volunteer that the snacks are for the CHILDREN (and that she shouldn’t eat them all herself)?”

—**Clara Hemphill, founding editor of InsideSchools.org and author of *New York City’s Best Public Elementary Schools***

“In these pages teachers will find ways to mend the disconnect they commonly feel between their reasons for choosing teaching and the fears about struggles in the early part of their careers. Covering crucial territory that is often overlooked in certification programs, . . . Kriegel guides the reader with humor, care, and incisive intelligence. It’s a book to devour from cover to cover, and to return to often.”

—**Andra Miletta, assistant professor, Mercy College**

“Finally, a practical survival guide for first-year teachers that provides the blueprint for what you need to do—and how—to be an effective teacher. Every teacher beginning their career should have this book.”

—**Andrea Franks, veteran 4th- and 5th-grade teacher, New York City**

“Otis Kriegel has provided sound, pragmatic advice on the multitude of topics and issues that brand-new teachers brave in their first year. School administrators should enclose a copy of this book with every signed contract. Many teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching because they are overwhelmed by the vast responsibilities of the job. We administrators are challenged to find genuine, meaningful ways to support them. Kriegel taps into his substantial teaching experience to weave together a comprehensive roadmap to student success and support, coupled with increased teacher satisfaction and competence.”

—**Lois Kortum, 40-year veteran independent school administrator**

Everything a New Elementary School Teacher REALLY Needs to Know

(But Didn't Learn
in College)

Otis Kriegel, M.S.Ed.

free spirit
PUBLISHING®



Text copyright © 2013 by Otis Kriegel
Illustrations copyright © 2013 by Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Unless otherwise noted, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations or critical reviews. For more information, go to www.freespirit.com/company/permissions.cfm.

Free Spirit, Free Spirit Publishing, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Free Spirit Publishing Inc. A complete listing of our logos and trademarks is available at www.freespirit.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kriegel, Otis.

Everything a new elementary school teacher really needs to know : (but didn't learn in college) / Otis Kriegel, M.S.Ed.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57542-428-6

ISBN-10: 1-57542-428-2

1. Elementary school teaching—United States. 2. First year teachers—United States.
3. Classroom management—United States. I. Title.

LB1555.K75 2012

371.14'40973—dc23

2012046272

eBook ISBN: 978-1-57542-643-3

Free Spirit Publishing does not have control over or assume responsibility for author or third-party websites and their content. At the time of this book's publication, all facts and figures cited within are the most current available. All telephone numbers, addresses, and website URLs are accurate and active; all publications, organizations, websites, and other resources exist as described in this book; and all have been verified as of February 2013. If you find an error or believe that a resource listed here is not as described, please contact Free Spirit Publishing. Parents, teachers, and other adults: We strongly urge you to monitor children's use of the Internet.

Edited by Eric Braun
Cover and interior design by Tasha Kenyon
Illustrations by Rosie Scott
Author photo by Peter Bosch

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
Printed in the United States of America

Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Minneapolis, MN
(612) 338-2068
help4kids@freespirit.com
www.freespirit.com

Printed on
recycled paper



including 30%
post-consumer waste

As a member of the Green Press Initiative, Free Spirit Publishing is committed to the three Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Whenever possible, we print our books on recycled paper containing a minimum of 30% post-consumer waste. At Free Spirit it's our goal to nurture not only children, but nature too!



Free Spirit offers competitive pricing.

Contact edsales@freespirit.com for pricing information on multiple quantity purchases.

To my parents, Marilyn and Bob Kriegel, two people who continue to dedicate their lives to learning and teaching at every opportunity they can get. Thank you both for all the guidance and love.

Contents

Introduction: Welcome to the Front Line.....	1
BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEAR	5
1. Making Your Classroom Work for You	6
Room Design and Traffic Patterns	7
The Teacher’s Desk	11
The Meeting Area.....	13
So Many Supplies and So Little Room.....	15
Backpacks and Jackets	15
Rain and Snow Wear	16
Lunch Boxes	17
Decorating	18
Classroom Library.....	19
Getting Books	19
Organization	20
Manipulatives and Other Supplies	22
Don’t Forget a Padlock.....	24
Your Lesson Plan Book	25
Stay Comfortable: Clothes and Shoes	26
Setting Up for the Year, Not the Moment	28
2. Learning Your School’s Culture	29
Who You Need to Know: The Big Four	29
The Office Manager, Administrative Assistant, or School Secretary.....	30
The Custodian.....	30
Your Teacher Representative (or Union Representative).....	31
The Principal.....	32

Finding a Mentor	33
Other Important People	34
The Art of the Stolen Idea	35
Day-to-Day Routines and Rules	36
Absence and Lateness	36
Sickness and Substitutes	38
Walking the Halls	39
Restroom Policies	39
Lunchtime	40
Inclement Weather Procedure	41
Communication	41
Let Them Know Before You Go	42
Technology and Internet	43
Morning Drop-Off	44
After-School Routines	45
Field Trips	47
Copies	49
Bulletin Boards	50
Teaching and Student Assessment	51
Teacher Assessment	52
Report Cards	52
Getting to Know the Parents	54
First Day of School Note Home	54
Back to School Night or Meet the Teacher Night	54
Parent-Teacher Conferences	55
PTA/PTO	55
Responsibilities Beyond the Classroom	55
Committees	56
Meetings, Conferences, and Professional Development	57
Fundraisers	57

Graduation.....	59
Holidays and Birthdays.....	59
School Performances, Trips, and Functions	60
Calendar of Events	60
Emergencies and Drills	61
A School Where You Fit—And That Fits You.....	61
3. Setting Up for a Terrific Year	62
The Daily Schedule	63
The Lesson Plan.....	65
The Morning Meeting.....	66
Morning Independent Work	68
Extra Worksheets.....	69
Organizing Student Work.....	70
Student Portfolios	71
Homework	72
Why Give Homework?	72
The Homework Folder.....	73
The Homework Notebook.....	74
The Homework Folder Bin.....	75
The Homework Record Book.....	76
Checking In Homework	76
Returning Homework	78
The Scrap Paper Bin	78
Recycling Paperwork.....	80
The File Cabinet	81
Pencils	82
The New Student	83
IEPs and Special Education	85
Working with Specialists.....	87
You Don't Need to Be a Genius to Use an Interactive Whiteboard.....	89

The Internet	91
Prepare, Learn, and Teach	92

DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR..... 93

4. Working with Students..... 94

Cubbies or Desks?.....	95
------------------------	----

Seat Assignments.....	97
-----------------------	----

Managing School Supplies.....	99
-------------------------------	----

Managing in the First Days	99
----------------------------------	----

Managing Throughout the Year	100
------------------------------------	-----

Managing Unwanted Donations	101
-----------------------------------	-----

Is Raising Hands Too Old-Fashioned?	102
---	-----

I Can't Get Their Attention!	104
------------------------------------	-----

Transitions	106
-------------------	-----

Class Guidelines and Tone	109
---------------------------------	-----

Consistency	110
-------------------	-----

Student Input.....	111
--------------------	-----

Reward Systems.....	113
---------------------	-----

Consequences for Misbehavior	115
------------------------------------	-----

Empathize.....	118
----------------	-----

Behavior Contract.....	118
------------------------	-----

Behavior Modifications (B-Mods)	119
---------------------------------------	-----

Community Building	121
--------------------------	-----

Celebrate Your Students' Work.....	123
------------------------------------	-----

Teaching Whole Class, Small Groups, and One-on-One	124
--	-----

Whole Class.....	124
------------------	-----

Small Groups.....	125
-------------------	-----

One-on-One	127
------------------	-----

Getting Your Class into the World: Tips for Field Trips.....	128
--	-----

Plan for the Season	128
---------------------------	-----

Traveling with Your Class.....	129
--------------------------------	-----

Did You Talk to All of Your Students Today?	132
When the Rubber Hits the Road, Be Flexible	133
5. Working with Your Principal	134
Try to Solve the Problem on Your Own.....	136
Principals Need Your Help, Too	137
1. Keep Your Principal Informed	137
2. Share Ideas and Opinions	138
3. Take on Extra Tasks	139
What Principals Can Do for You.....	140
Making Friends with Your Boss	140

YOUR STUDENTS' FAMILIES..... 143

6. The Parent-Teacher Relationship	144
What You Want from Parents	146
What Parents Want from You	147
What Might Make Parents Unhappy with You	148
Methods of Communication	149
Email.....	149
Class Website.....	151
Phone Calls	151
Notes Home.....	153
When Is a Phone Call or Meeting Best?	154
A Mutually Beneficial Relationship.....	155
7. Communicating with Families	156
The First Day of School Note Home.....	156
Information About You	157
Attendance.....	157
Communication	157
Arrival and Dismissal.....	158
Vital Information	158

Local Walking Field Trip Permission Slip.....	160
Lunch and Snack.....	161
Homework.....	162
Physical Education.....	162
Art.....	162
Field Trips.....	162
Supplies.....	163
Wish List.....	163
The Weekly Note Home.....	165
Parents, Their Child, Social Media, and Your Classroom.....	166
Getting on the Same Page.....	174
8. When Families Come into the Classroom.....	175
Encouraging Involvement.....	175
The Classroom Door: Your Parent Visitation Policy.....	176
When Is a Good Time to Visit?.....	177
Angry Parent Visits.....	178
The Smooth Meet the Teacher Night.....	179
Preparing for the Evening.....	181
Getting Through the Evening.....	184
Sharing Bad News.....	188
Getting Yourself Through the Pile: Report Cards.....	189
Parent-Teacher Conferences.....	191
Making a Schedule That Works.....	192
Who Should Come to the Conference?.....	195
Share the Report Card Before the Meeting.....	196
What Do I Say During the Conference?.....	196
Your Volunteer Squad.....	200
Volunteering in Class.....	202
Volunteering on a Field Trip.....	202

Befriending a Parent: A Good or Bad Idea?	203
Working with Parents Is a Big Part of the Job	204

YOUR LIFE AS A TEACHER 205

9. Managing the Workload...... 206

Leave It at School!..... 207

One Week Ahead: Lesson Planning..... 208

Under the Magnifying Glass:

How to Have an Awesome Observation..... 210

 Let Your Class Know..... 211

 Display the Schedule and Lesson Plans..... 212

 Have All Materials Ready..... 212

 Know Why You're Doing What You're Doing..... 212

 Differentiate..... 213

 Be Ready with Past Work..... 213

 Be Yourself..... 213

 Start—and End—with a Bang..... 214

 Manage Your Time..... 214

Curriculum and Behavior..... 215

Delegate: Get Help!..... 216

Keep Your Perspective..... 217

10. Balancing Your Responsibilities...... 218

The Jobs Not Included in Your Job Description..... 220

The Positive Influence: Your Exciting Life..... 220

The Well-Rested Teacher vs. the Exhausted Teacher..... 222

You're Ready..... 225

Resources...... 227

Acknowledgments..... 228

Index..... 230

About the Author..... 233

Introduction

Welcome to the Front Line

At the beginning of my sixth year of teaching, I was speaking to a fellow teacher and education professor who was about to send her own child off to school. She was upset because her daughter was assigned to a first-year teacher.

“It’ll be a wasted year,” she lamented. “I’m going to have her moved.”

“Wasted? Come on!” I wanted to believe she was exaggerating.

“Don’t you remember when you first started,” she continued, “not knowing how to get from one minute to the next? First-year teachers are so overwhelmed they hardly remember to take attendance or lock their classroom door at the end of the day. Hopefully she won’t lose my kid on her first trip to the auditorium.”

I have many great memories from my first year of teaching, and I know I was a positive influence in the lives of my students. Overall, it was a successful year. Still, I knew what she meant. I had spent much of my first year just trying to keep my head above water. I remembered the exhaustion and the confusion, the mistakes and the mystery. We began to share our war stories: What it was like when we opened the doors to our first class and discovered the mess that had been left over the summer, collecting dust and mouse droppings; the parent she lost on a field trip; the day I had to teach while covered in glue from a project gone awry. But I also remembered the victories. Why couldn’t I have capitalized on those moments?

It isn’t breaking news that the first year of teaching is tough, but I couldn’t help but think it didn’t have to be so hard.

Why, in two years of graduate school, including a year of student teaching, did no one think to mention that it would be a good idea to keep a spare change of clothes at work if I unexpectedly found myself covered in glue—or maybe paint, dirt, vomit, or pee? Why didn't any of the books for new teachers cover how to prepare for a new student in the middle of the ninth week of school, or when is the best time to schedule morning meetings, or how to get through the pile of report cards in a reasonable amount of time? What about the big question that every new teacher wonders: What should I do first?

There were books written on the topic, but none of them seemed to address the down and dirty truths of the first year in the classroom, and most of these tomes were oversized or outdated. The systems and secrets experienced by teachers all seemed to be learned the hard way. Was there really a need for me—and every other new teacher—to reinvent the wheel every September?

After that conversation, I was invited by two of my former student teachers and their professor to speak to their class about how to avoid the pitfalls of the first year of teaching. It was a sign. In response, I developed a workshop called “How to Survive Your First Years Teaching.” Since then, I have conducted the workshop for hundreds of preservice teachers and veteran educators alike. Participants learn practical information, tips, and strategies that I learned through my own experience and that of my colleagues and friends—information that is typically overlooked or underrated in teacher preparation programs, whether graduate, undergraduate, alternative, or emergency certification.

What lies between the covers of this book is the meat of that workshop: the systems, tips, strategies, and ideas that will enable you to thrive in any situation, from how to organize your classroom to how to deal with an angry parent—and everything in between. It isn't about curriculum,

educational theory, or the historical foundations of the craft of teaching, all of which are important but well-covered elsewhere. Instead, it's about developing your own blueprint for managing the day-to-day challenges of being a teacher so you can feel more confident, relaxed, and in control, which in turn will enable you to be a more effective teacher. This information will make your first years of teaching infinitely easier and you more prepared and confident.

This book is meant to read like a travel guide or a manual, so treat it as one. Feel free to read it in a way that works for you. You might go from front to back and dog-ear the pages you find relevant. Or look through the table of contents and find the sections you know you need help with—but be sure to read these well before you need them. For example, read the section on parent-teacher conferences a month before the conferences, not a few days before.

This book is organized into four main parts:

- **Before the School Year** helps you get ready before the students arrive. You'll learn tips for effectively arranging and stocking your classroom, fitting into your school's culture, and establishing systems for managing your days—and your students when they arrive. Think of this part as a map; it gives an overview of much of the material that is covered in greater depth later in the book.
- **During the School Year** provides guidelines for teaching and working with kids and building a productive relationship with your principal.
- **Your Students' Families** covers the parents and other family adults who are attached to the kids. You'll want to cultivate smooth relationships with these people through clear, efficient communication and expectations. These chapters show you how.
- **Your Life as a Teacher** is all about balancing your sometimes overwhelming job with your outside life.

Every chapter is chock full of advice, tips, and guidelines that you can take as is or tweak to fit your own needs. You'll also find true stories— anecdotes I experienced or heard from friends (they're printed in **this font**). Boxed sections labeled BTW (“By the Way”) are little tidbits of information or quick tips that you may find important.

You're lucky. As a teacher, you're not going to be stuck behind a desk all day, and you *definitely* won't be bored! You're on the front line of society, working hand in hand with the future leaders of the towns, cities, and countries that make up our planet. It's inspiring, energizing, humbling, and incredibly rewarding work.

Get in there, be proud, and have fun.

OTIS KRIEGL

P.S. I would love to hear how this book has helped you in your first years of teaching. If you have any stories or questions for me, I can be reached through my publisher at:

Free Spirit Publishing Inc.
217 Fifth Avenue North, Suite 200
Minneapolis, MN 55401-1299
www.freespirit.com
help4kids@freespirit.com

BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEAR

Picture this: You open the door to your new classroom on a sunny morning in August. You see stacks of dusty tables and chairs, a teacher's desk stuck between a few empty bookshelves, and maybe a few dictionaries and math books. Stubs of pencils and paperclips have been swept into a corner along with broken pieces of chalk—even though you don't have a chalkboard in the room.

Or maybe the room you walk into is clean but empty, or maybe the walls and bulletin boards are still plastered with student work and visual aids from the class that occupied the room last year.

Whatever state you find your new classroom in, it may be hard to imagine what it will look like with 30 kids and you, all working in harmony. You may think, "I'm supposed to change this into a learning environment? Is this a joke?"

Take a deep breath. With a little time and preparation, you—and your class—will be fine.

In this section, you'll learn how to turn a mess—or a sterile room—into a friendly, efficient learning environment. You'll also learn how to soak up the school culture, practices, and expectations on the fly.

The most important thing to remember is that every situation is different for a new teacher. Use what applies to your circumstances. Feel free to make adjustments. Read on for ideas to make your classroom, and your role in the school culture, fit who you are.

Chapter
ONE

Making Your Classroom Work for You

It can be reassuring to look into the classroom and imagine 30 students hustling their way through the day, thinking, talking, and exploring. But before the classroom is set up, that image can seem as far away as a tropical island when you're standing in the middle of a hailstorm. To get everything organized the way you want, give yourself at least three to four days.

What does a terrific teacher's classroom look like? It can be the essence of organization, or it can look, to an outsider at least, like a mass of chaos and confusion. Some teachers put desks in rows and others group tables together. Some have massive, ocean-sized rugs where they do the majority of their teaching, while others use a mix of different styles. On your way to becoming that terrific teacher, you'll have many decisions to make about desks, rugs, supply shelves, decorations, and a lot more. As you work through all these details, your style will begin to emerge. But be open to changing as the year progresses.

Use the ideas in this chapter as inspiration and a guide, adjusting what you need to make the classroom work for you.

ROOM DESIGN AND TRAFFIC PATTERNS

When setting up desks, tables, chairs, bookshelves, the classroom library, learning centers, cubbies, and bulletin boards, the most important factor to consider is traffic. You and your students will be moving around this room all day. You need to be able to get from one side of the room to the other without causing a minor catastrophe like tripping over a student's lunch box, backpack, or foot.

Also, you should be able to see everyone from anywhere. It's nice to have a little library nook in a first-grade class, filled with bean bags and pillows, but if you can't see in there, who knows what's happening? You need to be able to stand up and look across the room and see what's going on in each and every corner. What you can't see is what you don't know, and what you don't know may very well spell trouble.

I thought I had set up such a nice first-grade classroom. There were little learning nooks, well-organized learning centers, and assigned desks for group work. I was working in a corner of the room at a kidney-shaped table with a small group of students when I heard one of my students yell at another. I looked out across the room but couldn't see who it was. I stood, and I could just see the tops of their heads as they wrestled in the library area. By the time I got to them—after tripping over a desk and knocking over a box of crayons—they were both crying and angry. If I had thought of the importance of being able to easily travel across the room, I could have avoided having to jump over various pieces of furniture to break up the skirmish. And if I could have seen what was happening I could have intervened sooner.

Before you begin to organize your desks (or tables if you'll be using them instead), try to find out how many you're going to need. Get your class list or at least an estimate of how many kids will be in your class.

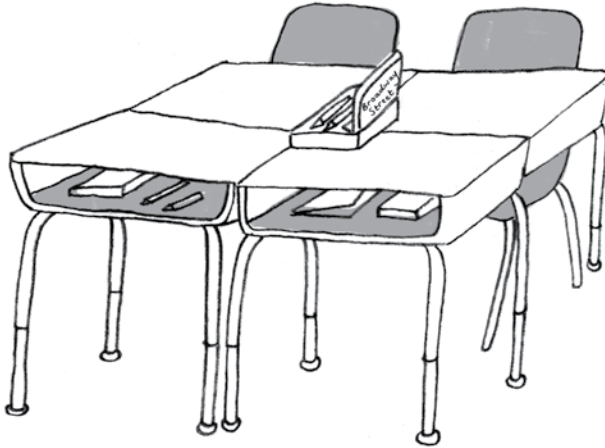
Next, think about how you want to group your desks. Many elementary school teachers put desks or tables together in clusters so students sit in groups of two to six, while others prefer rows. I like clusters because it helps kids naturally learn from each other, not just me, and they can easily work together in groups or independently as the situation calls for. The downside of clusters is that it can promote student chatter. Rows can keep the class quieter, but I think rows are isolating for students. Besides, nowhere else in life will they sit in rows except when taking their drivers' test at the DMV.

Your school may have a preference, and you can also get ideas from looking at other classrooms in your school and talking to other teachers.

Once you have some ideas, decide on a plan and set up your desks. Then pull out the chairs just slightly from the desks to emulate how they'll be with kids sitting and working. Walk through the room. Can you make it from one side to the other without tripping? Do you need to crawl over a desk? If so, change the design until you can get across the room easily from multiple starting points. Take the time to try several setups. You might want to make drawings so you can check out a few different plans quickly.

After you've set up your desks or tables, leave them alone for a day and begin to work on other parts of the floor plan, like the meeting area, the library, and the shelves that will hold supplies. As the rest

BTW: It can be fun to name clusters or tables after a part of the curriculum. If you're studying the state in which you teach, name them after important locations or events. For example, when I taught first grade, we were studying the neighborhood, so I named the tables after local street names. When my students went outside after school, they recognized the street signs as the same words used at their table. I heard, "Hey, I know what that says! I can read that!"



of the room takes shape, you may notice congestion or other problems you hadn't thought of before. Remember: you can always change your classroom setup. It's not set in stone or bolted to the floor. (At least I hope it isn't!)

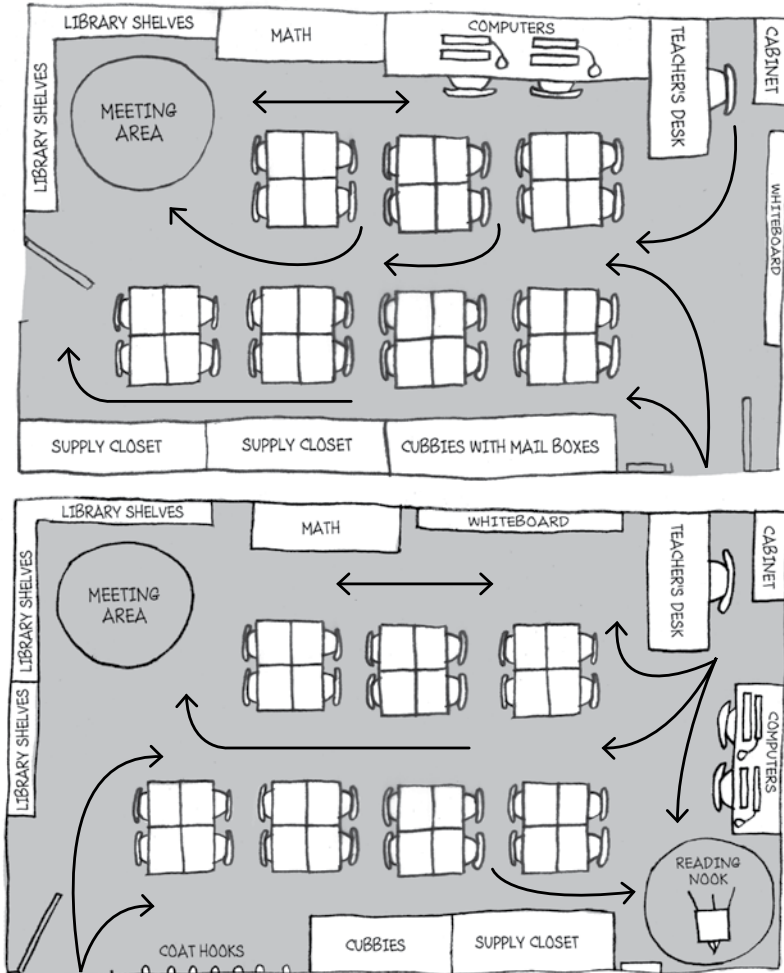
Never block the door or put a student's desk near the door. The student sitting there will get no work done at all because she'll be distracted by students and adults coming and going. You're also going to need fresh air in the classroom, so be sure not to block the windows either (if you have them). You want to be able to easily open and close them.

BTW: If you can, squeeze in a place in the classroom for one table or desk away from the others. This can be called the "Alone Table." Use it as a place to send kids who are distracting others or for someone who needs some time away from the group to calm down or concentrate. The Alone Table will come in handy on an almost daily basis. If you don't have an extra table, use a pillow and a clipboard.

Finally, remember that a warm classroom can put kids to sleep. I like to keep my classroom temperature brisk yet comfortable, so students are aware and awake. If you work in a consistently warm area of the

country, purchase a number of small fans to keep the air circulating. And remember, kids can get smelly. Airflow throughout the classroom keeps things smelling better and naturally cleans out germs. And you'll have plenty of those!

Two Designs for Smooth Traffic Flow



THE TEACHER'S DESK

"I haven't sat at my desk for a week," one veteran teacher complained to me. "I'm getting rid of it. It doesn't make sense to keep it."

It's your choice whether to have a teacher's desk, so think about how you'll use it. If it's just going to end up being a large piece of furniture taking up space, ditch it. Instead of a desk, I use a small table next to two file cabinets in the corner of the room. This is where I put things like papers to file, papers to grade, pens, and others things that are important to me in the near future (within the next few days). My setup wasn't always like this.

During my first year of teaching I had a real "teacher's desk." I never taught from it, but it was a very prominent part of the classroom. One afternoon my students were working on group projects. All of the tables in the room were occupied, and two students had nowhere to work. I suggested they work on the rug, but neither of them wanted to. They had spent the better part of the morning on the rug. One of the two students was very tall (for a second grader) and wanted to sit up. His back hurt from bending over on the rug. We looked around and couldn't find a spot. Finally, one of the kids looked at my desk, which was covered in papers, curriculum guides, and pencils. "Why can't we use your desk?" she asked. My first thought was "No way. That's my desk." But I quickly realized it was a great idea. The desk was taking up a lot of room. "We'll even clean it up for you, Mr. K," she continued, "because it's really messy." Together we cleaned it off and, to my surprise and their amusement, we recycled half of the paperwork. That afternoon I got rid of the desk and replaced it with a smaller table that was more kid-friendly as well as two portable plastic file boxes that I still have. When my students arrived the next morning, the two who had worked at my desk noticed the change. One commented, "Good job." The other, who had a critical eye and a

more judgmental tone, was more direct: “That desk was stupid. It was too big and messy and you were never there, anyway. You’re always with us.” They were both right.

I’ve seen teachers position a desk front and center and teach from it. Personally, I don’t find that effective. I cannot manage a class or teach effectively from the seat of my pants. I want to be up and moving around. Still, there are some very creative ways to effectively use a desk in the classroom. A friend of mine puts his desk in the middle of the classroom and decorates it with bins and shelves on three sides. This is where students leave finished work or grab new work while he conferences with other students, makes edits, records progress, and restocks bins with different assignments.

Instead of a desk, one teacher I know uses 10 to 15 file folders stapled to a cork or foam board. Each folder is labeled with the name of an academic subject or other topic such as “Parent Correspondence,” and she files her papers into them right there on the wall. As she says, “It keeps me organized and doesn’t take up floor space.”

My mother did her student teaching with a woman who’d worked with legendary education reformer John Dewey. This woman didn’t believe in using a desk. Instead, she wore it! Every day she dressed in overalls and kept supplies that she needed, like a stapler, pencils, erasers, sharpeners, crayons, markers, and more, on her body. She was like a moving office supply store. If you needed it, she had it.

Again, it’s your choice if you want to use a desk. A desk can be a convenient place to store your supplies and personal items. It can also inhibit a friendly classroom tone, take up a lot of room, and end up collecting a lot of junk. The right answer is what works well for you and your teaching style. Think it over and experiment, but keep in mind that

space for the kids is the priority. If you do use a teacher's desk, try not to spend too much time sitting there or it can reduce interaction with students. If you find yourself presiding over class from the desk too often, it's time to get off your backside and get to work!

THE MEETING AREA

The meeting area is often considered a hub of a classroom, around which all activity centers. So where does the almighty meeting area go? It depends upon the size and shape of your room, of course, and you might not have space for it. If you do, the most important factor is to make sure you have enough space for your students to come together without sitting on top of each other. Also, the meeting area must be accessed from multiple places in the room. You might be conducting a meeting or a lesson and someone will arrive late, need to use the restroom, or get picked up early. Students must be able to leave and return without disturbing other students. I learned this from watching another teacher (something I still do regularly; there is always more to learn).

One of my colleagues is a truly gifted upper-elementary teacher. She is fun, tough, and very creative. The meeting area is the focal point of her classroom. It's large enough for everyone to sit together in a circle so every member of the class, including herself, can be an equal participant. Outside of the meeting area, she has tables, but she doesn't assign spots to students; instead, they can work at tables or in the meeting area. When you enter her room it feels like everyone is part of one big machine. Kids lie on the rug in the meeting area working on clipboards alone or in groups. Students use cubbies to store their personal items; the rest of the classroom is shared space.

Besides the location of your meeting area, you can even go so far as to plan ahead how you want your students to sit when they are there. Do you

want them to sit in a circle or in a clump? When I taught first, second, and third grades, I had my students sit in an organized circle, just like my colleague does with her upper-grade class. I was always a part of that circle. In the upper grades, we sat in more of a clump, or clustered group, because students were more independent and responsible. Still, you have

to be careful that students don't hide behind each other. Be sure you can see, and make eye contact with, everyone.

Don't be afraid to change from clump to circle or vice versa if one method is not working. If your kids are not paying attention when sitting in a clump, switch to the circle. And if you feel your class can handle the responsibility of breaking the structure of an organized circle, then try the clump. Change to what is going to work for your class and for you.

BTW: Set up your meeting area so you can always see the classroom door. That way, you can welcome visitors without having to move or reorient yourself. Whether it's a parent, a superintendent, an observer, the principal, or a student, you want to see who is coming in that door.

Another thing you'll need to decide is whether to use a rug. A rug is more comfortable than the floor, but it must be cleaned or little insects—like lice—will live there. You can get a rug and remove it later if it doesn't work for you. If you decide to use a rug in your meeting area, make sure to buy a vacuum or chip in with other teachers on your floor or grade level and share it. Use it daily and wash the carpet every month or so. A rug can get seriously nasty in a hurry.

Don't spend a lot of money on your rug, either. Many teacher supply stores offer rugs with the states or letters on them. If you have the budget, go ahead and get one. Otherwise, go to a local carpet store and tell them you're a teacher and the size you need. If they have a remnant in good shape, they'll likely let you have it. You'd be surprised how willing folks will be to help out a local teacher.

SO MANY SUPPLIES AND SO LITTLE ROOM

You'll have a lot of school supplies, even on the first day, including things like paper, notebooks, folders, pencils, pencil boxes, tape, glue, crayons, and so on. If the school provides supplies, find a place to store them before the students arrive—a place that's easily accessible.

If students are bringing their own school supplies, the first day can be hectic as your empty classroom fills up in a hurry. You can have students put their materials away in their desks or cubbies, but plan to spend a few minutes on this, especially with students in lower elementary classes. If you plan to have all students contribute to a shared collection of school supplies that you will hand out during the year as needed, put out two or three empty crates or boxes and tell students to put their supplies in them. After everyone has arrived, slide the boxes out of the way and deal with them later. Otherwise, you won't be teaching. You'll just be organizing paper, pencils, and markers while simultaneously trying to get to know your new class of students. This is not a good way to begin. But of course, this is a good problem to have. In some situations, you'll receive few supplies at all. If you work in a community where some families can't afford supplies, buy extra if you can afford it and have them on hand.

Backpacks and Jackets

Where are students going to hang their backpacks? Hanging them on the back of chairs can work, but that can impair everyone's ability to move around the room (and ruin your thoughtful classroom traffic plan). If you have a closet with hooks inside, that works great. Hooks on the wall, usually

BTW: If you don't have room elsewhere for jackets, have kids fold them and put them in their backpacks. They only use them a few times a day, and it may save you a lot of space and headaches.