Back-to-School Survival Guide

- Parent Partnerships
- Classroom organization tips
- First day ice-breakers
- Inspiration for the tough days

2016-2017
Dear Teacher,

You respond to a very special calling. It takes a lot of passion, dedication, patience, hard work and heart to be an educator today. The to-do lists are endless for the teachers devoted to help kids reach their full potential and set them up for success. Teaching can be stressful and sometimes overwhelming. But when you realize how important your job is and the difference you can make in the life of a child, the rewards are amazing!

Together with our friends at EXPO®, Mr. Sketch®, Paper Mate®, Sharpie®, and X-ACTO®, we’ve created this Back-to-School Survival Guide to help you kick off the new year with a few new classroom strategies, ideas to engage parents, fun first-day ice-breakers, and inspiration to help you through the tough days.

Whether you’re just starting your first year or you’re a veteran of 20 years, we hope you find this resource valuable. As you get ready to welcome a new group of students, we’d like to be among the first to wish you the best school year ever.

We are honored that you’ve let us be a part of your classroom and that we’re able to help so many kids build, create, and learn for life.

Thank you for all you do to set kids up for success!

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Partner with Parents

Parental involvement is one of the most important factors in academic success. The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is how the family supports learning, creativity, and communication at home. Extensive research now identifies cognitive benefits such as fine motor skills, executive functioning and visual-spatial skills gained from simply engaging children in simple arts and crafts activities. Be sure to browse our lesson plan library. Many lesson plans include a printable parent letter and easy home activity to extend learning and build a healthy home-school partnership.

Something to Talk About

Research shows that regular family meals are linked to higher student achievement, confidence, better social skills and a more positive outlook on life. Promote healthy dialogue by sharing the Table Talk handout and parent letter. Reinforce the notion that talking about school is important for both the parent and the student.

Early Introductions

Scheduling a "Meet and Greet" before the school year starts can be well worth your time. An open house event for an hour or two prior to the first day gives you a chance to meet your new students and parents and disseminate some important forms that will help you get a sense of the new team. Reproduce the Welcome Back Survey handout to share with parents and plant the seeds early for their involvement and healthy communication.

Dear Parents:

I am your child's 4th grade teacher, and I am delighted to have your child in my class this year. I am looking forward to a great year and I know you are, too. I have high expectations for my students, and it is my goal to do everything I can to make sure my classroom is a safe place where they will thrive.

Your involvement is critical. I realize that all children do not work at the same pace and each has different academic strengths and weaknesses. I encourage you to have conversations with your child about what we are doing in school, what he/she likes, finds challenging, etc. Your participation and support will not only communicate your value for education to your child, but also instill good study habits and a positive attitude toward learning.

When we work together, students are so much more successful. Please feel free to contact me at 123-456-7890 ext. 122 or jstevens@anyschool.com if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

[Dear Parents letter example]

Take some time in the beginning of the year to make it easy to communicate with parents throughout the year. Create several sets of address labels for your new class to make it fast and easy to mail correspondence. Send a letter like the one shown here home to parents prior to the first day to set high expectations for their participation in an effective home-school partnership.

A quick postcard to parents is a great way to promote positive interaction and keep them engaged. Purchase a set from a school supply store or design and print your own using Sharpie markers on heavy card stock. To ensure you reach every parent with good news, prepare an entire set of postcards with mailing labels and stamps. Keep the set handy throughout the year. When you catch a student being good, jot a quick note on the card and drop it in the mail. You'll easily be able to see which parents haven't received a card by those that are left.
Get Organized!

Your classroom is your home away from home. From the desk arrangement to bulletin boards to learning centers, creating a welcoming space takes time, planning and thought. You want to be able to express your style and personality in your classroom, but it should also be warm, welcoming, and conducive to learning. Here are a few simple things to think about as you set up your space.

**Bulletin Boards**
Strategically plan your bulletin boards so that you don’t have to change them all at once. Decide which bulletin boards you’ll change seasonally or to correspond with learning units and which will stay up all year long like the calendar or job assignment. Consider using fabric for the background of those that you’ll be updating. Fabric doesn’t fade as fast as butcher paper, and won’t show the staple or tack holes when you change the display. Black fabric will generally work with any display and makes the other colors on your board and borders really pop.

**Keep the Traffic Moving**
Think about your furniture arrangement so that students can easily access centers, bookshelves, the pencil sharpener, and other materials easily but also without disrupting other students. Avoid unnecessary decorative clutter and think about the high-traffic areas and and potential disruptions caused by students that are out of their seats. An effective arrangement creates paths for movement while minimizing disruptions to keep kids on task.

**Communication Center**
Reduce the clutter on your desk each day by creating a communication center where students can leave notes from home or pick up lunch menus, permission slips, and other forms. Everything is organized for them and for you.

**Leave a Message**
Minimize outside disruptions by attaching an EXPO Dry Erase marker to a piece of Elmer’s Dry Erase Foam Board on the outside of your door. Visitors can leave you a quick note without disrupting your instruction, and you can get back to them later.

**Pour on the Awesome Sauce**
Promote a positive community by giving students a place to share compliments or kind comments with other students. Encourage them to write notes that acknowledge positive behaviors they see in the classroom. Create a fun Awesome Sauce container where students can place the notes. Write your name on the Awesome Sauce Labels handout and glue them to a large plastic water bottle. At the end of the week, read the notes aloud and watch them beam with pride!

If you have limited bulletin board space, use Elmer’s Foam Board and Elmer’s Cork Foam Board to create a portable communication center to place on a shelf or chalk tray. Add various sections for specific forms, notes, etc. Add fabric, ribbon, and other embellishments to match your classroom decor and show your style.
First Day Ice-Breakers

The first day of school can be filled with a wide range of different emotions for you and your students. From nervous excitement to apprehension and uncertainty, many students will arrive at your door with hopeful optimism that your classroom will be safe, fun, comfortable place to be. It is essential that you and your students learn how to create a positive learning environment that will set the stage for the entire year. It is also critical that students develop trusting and enriching relationships with one another. Here are a few activities that are great ice-breakers for the first day and can also be used throughout the year to encourage and maintain positive relationships and a healthy respect for student diversity.

A Smelly Summer Adventure
Place a variety of Mr. Sketch Scented Washable Markers in a bag or container. Instruct the students to select a marker without looking. Provide time for students to smell the markers, discuss the scents with their peers, and enjoy the novelty.

Provide each student with the Mr. Sketch Invention Adventure handout, and explain the directions. Students will fill in the words on the first page. Then, they will transfer the words to the lines on the second page to complete the story. This is a fun, risk-free way for students to introduce themselves.

Getting to Know You
Give students an opportunity to find out what they have in common with their classmates. Copy the Getting to Know One Another handout for each student and ask them to see how many classmates’ names they can add in each box. This activity can be modified and used throughout the year by simply changing the prompts in the boxes.

On a Roll
Create an environment that nurtures respect for the learning process as well as the unique differences among the students in your class. Reproduce the On a Roll handout and provide time for students to cut out and construct the cube. Explain to students that we all have unique strengths, and while none of us are great at everything we are all great at some things. This introductory activity is a great self-reflection exercise as well as a way to reinforce a strong sense of community in your classroom.

The Top Ten List
Celebrate student strengths by providing them with an opportunity to share 10 reasons why they are awesome. This is a fun way to get them thinking and writing about what makes them unique and important members of your classroom community. Be sure to give kids a chance to share their lists with each other or the class.

Pop Quiz
Surprise your students with a pop quiz on the first day. Read a series of statements about yourself such as “I went to Mexico on vacation this year” or “I have a pet parakeet named Bingo.” Make sure at least some of the statements are not true. Ask the students to write “true” or “false” for each statement. This is a great way to introduce yourself and the activity. Then, ask students to write three statements about themselves on a piece of paper. Let them exchange papers with a partner and determine which statements are true and which are false.

Create a classroom book that illustrates the most important traits of your students. The Important Book by Margaret Wise Brown uses a simple text pattern and illustrations to describe the importance of ordinary things. Read the book aloud to your students and then use the Important Thing handout as a guide for each student to create one page in a classroom book that describes the important things about themselves. Take a photo of the entire class for the cover and bind the book. Be sure to have it on display at your first parent night.
When Things Don’t Go As Planned...

There will be days when nothing goes according to plan, your job feels like it’s harder than it has to be, and no one seems to notice your efforts. Don’t let those days overshadow the reason you chose to be a teacher in the first place. We all need a little reminder from time to time, and even the smallest expressions of encouragement can make a big difference.

Build a healthy network

It’s often easy to silo yourself in your classroom and overlook the importance of collaborating with colleagues to celebrate successes and overcome daily obstacles. If you don’t already have a network in place at your school, build one! Schedule time to have coffee or lunch on a regular basis with someone you trust and enjoy. Make time to share a new teaching strategy, a challenge you may be experiencing with a student, or something completely unrelated to school. Many days are fast and furious, and we need to make time to support one another or just engage in simple conversation.

Inspiration in a Jar

Start or end each day with a bit of inspiration to help you refocus on why you teach. Write inspirational quotes on small strips of paper, fold them up, and put them in a jar or container. Use the Inspirational Quotes handout to get started. You’ll find that some days that little reminder can help you readjust your attitude. Make it even more personal by adding your own positive thoughts throughout the year. When a child tells you that he “loves to come to school because of you,” write that down and add it to the jar. You’ll be amazed at how uplifting that can be to you later!

We tell students that mistakes are okay because they are part of the learning process. But we expect them to perform with accuracy when learning new skills. And when they don’t, some teachers assume that “failure” right along with their students.

Consider a different approach. Celebrate mistakes with the understanding that we can’t learn from them unless we acknowledge them. Once in awhile, provide each student with a sheet protector and an EXPO Dry Erase Marker. Let them “grade” their work as you go over the assignment together and share the correct answers. This enables you and them to identify and understand the concepts they may have missed.

And as for you, when a lesson doesn’t go as planned, stop and explain what you had envisioned and discuss how you might get back on track. Your students will appreciate your honesty and can learn from the way you model problem-solving.

“In a completely rational society, the best of us would aspire to be teachers and the rest of us would have to settle for something less, because passing civilization along from one generation to the next ought to be the highest honor and the highest responsibility that anyone could have.”

–Lee Iacocca

“I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. That is why I have succeeded.”

–Michael Jordan
### Table Talk

**Family conversation starters about things that matter!**

- Share one new thing that you learned today.
- Pick one person at the table and share what makes him/her special.
- Today, I am grateful for...
- If you could invite anyone to have dinner with us tonight, who would it be and why?
- The best thing that happened today was...
- Share one way that you showed kindness today.
- I get angry when....
- What makes you a good friend?
- Pick one person at the table and ask him/her to share a happy memory.
- What family tradition would you like to start?
- When do you feel loved?
- If you could change one thing about your school, what would it be?
- What are some things that you can do to cheer someone who is sad?
- Share a time when you were sad or upset.
- Three words that describe your day are....
- What would you do if you saw someone bullying your friend?

Research shows that regular family meals are linked to higher student achievement, self-esteem, and a positive outlook on life. Cut the conversation starters apart on the dotted lines. Add your own questions to the blank speech bubbles. Glue a photo of each family member and speech bubbles to an empty tissue box to decorate it as a fun storage container. Place the conversation starters in the box. The next time you share a meal together, take turns drawing questions to inspire meaningful dialogue about things that matter.

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Table Talk

Family conversation starters about things that matter!

It doesn’t have to be like this:

What happened at school today?

Nothing

Give them something to talk about!

(Cut out these speech bubbles and glue them to an empty tissue box with photos of your family members. Place the conversation starters inside the box.)

Fill these speech bubbles in with your own conversation starters.
Dear Parent or Guardian,

How many times have you asked your child what he or she did in school only to get the “nothing” response?

Our days are often busy and hectic. But the importance of taking a few moments to talk to our children about what they learned in school and what is going on with their friends and in their lives is essential.

Research shows that regular family meals are linked to higher student achievement, confidence, better social skills and a more positive outlook on life. In addition, children that enjoy meals at least 3-4 times per week with their families demonstrate lower rates of destructive behaviors.

I’m sharing this simple strategy to help you connect with your child’s school life through healthy dialogue. Recycle an empty tissue box and enjoy a few moments with your child decorating it using construction paper, glue, and scissors and other embellishments. Cut the conversations starters apart on the dotted lines and add your own questions to the blank speech bubbles. Fold them in half and place them in your Table Talk box. The next time you share a meal together, take turns drawing questions and enjoy simple quality time with your family. Conversations such as these promote reciprocal talk, vocabulary development, the sharing of positive emotions, and effective communication skills.

You are your child’s first and most important teacher. There is an abundance of research that demonstrates the positive affects of family engagement on student achievement and social and emotional growth. The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is how the family supports learning and open communication at home. I hope you will embrace this opportunity and enjoy meaningful dialogue over things that matter.

Thank you for your continued support.

Sincerely,
Welcome Back to School!

Dear Parent or Guardian,
I’m delighted to have your child in my class this year! I’m looking forward to a great year and I know that you are, too. My goal is to make sure that my classroom is a warm, safe place where students will learn, thrive and truly want to be. You’re involvement is critical. I realize that all children have different strengths, challenges and abilities. You are your child’s first and most important teacher. You know him/her better than anyone. Please take a few moments to complete this form and return it to me so that I can better meet your child’s needs and keep you informed throughout the year. I’m counting on your support so that together we can make this a fantastic school year! Thank you in advance for your support.

Sincerely,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent or Guardian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>email address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone (cell and home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. What are your child’s academic strengths?

2. What was your child’s greatest academic challenge last year?

3. What motivates your child?

4. What upsets your child?

5. How would you describe your child’s attitude toward school?

6. How would you describe your child’s organizational skills?

7. How would you describe your child’s social skills?

8. Are there any specific questions or concerns you’d like to share with me personally?

Signature: Date:
Margaret Wise Brown uses a simple text pattern in her book *The Important Book* to describe what is unique and special about common things around us. Read this sample from the book and identify the pattern.

The important thing about a spoon is that you eat with it.
It’s like a little shovel.
You hold it in your hand.
You can put it in your mouth.
It isn’t flat,
It is hollow,
And it spoons things up.
But the important thing about a spoon is that you eat with it.

Now, think about what makes you special. Use the author’s pattern to describe the important things about you. Use the writing frame below to organize your thoughts and write your draft. Then, create and illustrate a page about you for a classroom book.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Dislikes?</th>
<th>Favorite?</th>
<th>Most important thing?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The important thing about _______________ is ____________________________________________.

He/She likes ________________________________________________________________.

He/She is ___________________________________________________________________

His/Her favorite ________________ is ____________________________________________.

He/She isn’t ________________________________________________________________.

But the most important thing about _______________ is ____________________________.
On a Roll!

Directions: Cut out the cube on the bold black lines. Fold on the dashed lines. Glue to tabs to construct the cube. Gently toss the cube, answer the question on the top and share what makes you unique!

One thing I’m really good at is ________!

My best subject is ________!

I’m a great friend because ________!

It makes people feel good when I ________!

I’m really proud of myself when I ________!

One goal I have for this year is ________!

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It’s Nice to Meet You!

Directions: Find out more about your classmates as you complete each box below. Can you find at least one person who agrees with each statement? Write their names in the boxes.

Find someone who:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>loves to read</th>
<th>knows how to swim</th>
<th>has a younger brother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>has the same birthday month as you do</th>
<th>has a pet</th>
<th>plays a sport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>is a great artist</th>
<th>is great at math</th>
<th>plays a musical instrument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>loves science</th>
<th>moved here from a different school</th>
<th>is the oldest child in the family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Awesome Sauce Labels

Promote a positive community by giving students a place to share compliments or kind comments with other students. Encourage them to write notes that acknowledge positive behaviors they see in the classroom. Create a fun Awesome Sauce container where students can place the notes. Write your name on the Awesome Sauce labels and glue them to a large plastic water bottle or jar. At the end of the week, read the notes aloud and watch your students beam with pride!

Contains: respect, kindness, cooperation, responsibility, honesty, friendship, consideration, good manners, courage, and creativity.
Cut these inspirational quotes apart and place them in a container. When you need a small reminder of why you do what you do, take a breath and pull one out. Add your own throughout the year. Share this idea as a gift and make an “Inspiration Jar” for a colleague.

| Getting your students to like you is merely the other side of you liking them. | Your classroom must honor student questions as much as student answers. |
| Getting your students to like you is merely the other side of you liking them. | Your classroom must honor student questions as much as student answers. |
| I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. | To the world, you might be just one person; but to just one person, you might be the world. |
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| Kids don’t remember what you try to teach them. They remember what you are. | There are two kinds of teachers: the kind that fill you with so much quail shot that you just can’t move, and the kind that just gives you a little prod and you jump to the skies. |
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| Teaching was the hardest work I had ever done, and it remains the hardest work I’ve done to date. | For every one of us that succeeds, it’s because there is someone out there to show you the way out. The light doesn’t always necessarily have to be in your family. For me, it was teachers and school. |
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| There is no profession more essential than that of an educator, and it’s time for all of us to embrace and celebrate their importance and contribution to America’s children. | Teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools. The miracle is that at times they accomplish this impossible task. |
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| Everyone who remembers his own education remembers teachers, not methods and techniques. The teacher is the heart of the educational system. | The dream begins with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes and leads you to the next plateau, sometimes poking you with a sharp stick called ‘truth.’ |
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| It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge. | Children learn more from who you are than what you teach. |
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| Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” -- Anonymous | The highest goal an educator can have is that every afternoon, kids are chomping at the bit to come back tomorrow. |
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