

Classroom organization

“... smooth well-running classrooms where time, space and materials are used effectively maximize the opportunities students have to engage ...”

– Carolyn Evertson and Catherine Randolph,
Classroom Management in the Learning-centered Classroom

Structure classroom space

The physical arrangement of the furniture, supplies and resources in a classroom is a critical factor in promoting positive behaviour. In a well-designed classroom, the teacher can see all of the students and they can all see the teacher. The students can also see presentations and displays such as agendas, behavioural expectations, strategy posters and information on the board. Everyone can move about freely. High-traffic areas run smoothly without congestion.

Also, materials are easily accessible and stored in an orderly way. Organizing materials so they are easy to identify and easy to access can go a long way towards lowering frustrations, avoiding misunderstandings and making the best use of instructional time.

A well-designed classroom:

- is strategically planned for teacher and student movement
- supports classroom procedures for individual and group instruction
- facilitates the teacher’s efforts to make contact with individual students while also “working the crowd”
- considers the individual needs of students and fosters a sense of security
- minimizes distractions and encourages increased time on task
- makes students feel they have equal access to the teacher
- reduces frustrations for both students and teacher.

Sample strategies for organizing materials

- Ensure that students have their names prominently displayed on all personal supplies.
- Organize desks or lockers with labels and designated places for certain items.

- Establish a regular time for all students to clean and organize their desks and lockers. Some students may benefit from a visual “map” or picture of an organized desk or locker.
- Encourage students to use folders and binders with different colours or labels to separate work or materials for each class and/or subject.
- Encourage students to use pocket folders with new work on one side and graded work and class notes on the other.
- Teach students to ask themselves before each transition, “Do I have everything I need?”
- Be prepared to supply extra copies of misplaced handouts or materials.

Plan for movement

When students are able to move around the room naturally and purposefully, they feel less anxious, more alert and in some cases more relaxed. Students who can move around during class are better able to learn. Students have varying needs for movement but most will become restless or uncomfortable if seated for more than 20 minutes at a time. Even a 60-second movement break at regular intervals can help them refocus.

Sample strategies for creating opportunities for movement

- *Use active responses as part of instructional activities.*
For example, students may turn and talk with a partner, stand up to indicate agreement or move to different parts of the room to use materials. Allow students to work at different stations such as at a large table, the board, an easel or chart paper on a wall.
- *Look for nondistracting ways for students to move while working at their desks.*
For example, replace a student’s chair with a large ball. Students may bounce gently at their desks while working. Small inflatable seat cushions can also allow students to move without distracting others. Some students may find it helpful to stand while working at their desks. Others may work better sitting at a counter or on a stool.
- *Provide individual students with fidget toys.*
For example, they can keep a squeeze ball, eraser or wooden beads in their pockets to use quietly as needed.
- *Provide stretch or movement breaks as needed, or make them part of the classroom routine.*
Arrange an area in the classroom where students can move around without distracting others. Give students the option of going to this area when they need a stretch break.

- *Ask students who find it difficult to sit for long periods to do regular errands.*
For example, these students could pass out papers or put materials away. Older students might find it more comfortable and/or age-appropriate to deliver materials to the office or the library.
- *Establish an “I need a break” card system.*
If an individual student often needs a break, consider setting up a system of printed signal cards. This strategy requires teamwork and planning. For example:
 1. Individual students keep a specific number of file cards at their desks that say, “I need a break.”
 2. The student places a card on his or her desk to signal the teacher.
 3. The teacher acknowledges the request and, if the time is appropriate, exchanges the request card for a card that says something like, “Lee needs a five-minute break.”
 4. The student carries this card to the office or library and gives it to an adult such as the school secretary or librarian.
 5. The student spends the next five minutes engaging in a prearranged relaxing activity such as working on a puzzle or looking at a favourite book.
 6. When the time is up, the supervising adult thanks the student for the visit, comments on positive behaviour and gives the student a card to return to the classroom teacher. The card might say something like, “I enjoyed having Lee come to the office for a five-minute break.”

Students could receive a set number of “I need a break” cards at the beginning of the school day (e.g., one to four) and be responsible for planning when they will use them.

- *Ensure that students go out at recess and participate in daily physical activities.*
Students need physical activity to expend excess energy and restlessness. If a student has difficulty handling the stimulation of leaving the room with the whole group, consider delaying his or her exit until a minute or two after the other students have left.
- *Have some students rehearse before recess or other activities.*
If individual students find it difficult to manage recess or other less-structured activities, have them take a few minutes to rehearse. For example, just before recess the student can talk through these types of planning questions with a teacher, teacher assistant or a peer.
 1. Who are you going to play with at recess?

2. What kind of activity are you going to do?
3. If you have difficulty, what will you do?

Consider seating assignments

Seating students in strategic areas can increase the opportunities to reinforce positive behaviour and prevent or manage problem behaviours in a low-key way.

- Some students benefit from sitting close to the teacher, including those who:
 - need additional teacher prompts to overcome distractions
 - tend to withdraw from learning and social interaction
 - are struggling with aggression (these students also need some degree of separation from other students).
- Students who are overly dependent on adult approval or who tend to manipulate adults may benefit from working among students who are more self-directed. These other students can serve as positive role models.

Also consider the dynamics between students. Which students should be separated? Which students will benefit from sitting together because they share the same first language or can inspire confidence in one another?

Establish routines

Routines are prescribed lists of steps for particular actions or tasks, with a clear beginning and end. Students who have learned to follow predictable classroom routines are more independent and socially competent, and they have an increased sense of personal security. As a result, these students are more successful learners and have a reduced need for constant adult assistance.

Whenever possible, teach routines to a whole class rather than to just one student. However, individual students may also need extra teaching and guided assistance.

Teach routines directly, at the level of students' understanding, and provide visual reminders and reinforcement until all students have mastered them. Monitor behaviour regularly and look for ways to adjust and/or create routines that encourage and support positive behaviour and reduce problem behaviour.

Routines should be:

- useful to the student
- well-defined

- at the student's ability level
- visually presented as well as directly taught
- reinforced during teaching
- generalized to other environments whenever possible
- communicated to other school staff to ensure consistent expectations.

Examples of essential classroom routines include:

- managing personal and classroom materials
- attention cues and expectations for listening
- recording, completing and handing in homework
- effectively using time during individual work periods
- distributing and collecting assignments
- library use and borrowing classroom materials
- transitions within the classroom and between classes
- entering and exiting the school and classroom
- bathroom routines
- waiting for help or to take turns
- lunch
- asking for help or to leave the room
- using computer equipment
- making a phone call home
- setting up and using gym equipment, and changing clothing for gym class
- cooperative or partner work.

By actively monitoring student behaviour, teachers can determine the times when routines would be helpful. For example:

- If students take a long time to settle down after the lunch break, the teacher could have them come in, take out a book and read silently for five to ten minutes. This routine helps students to refocus and prepare for the next learning activity.
- If students are often restless during the last few minutes of the school day, the teacher could plan predictable and focused activities during this time, such as reading aloud to the students or having them write in their learning logs.

Signal to begin

Teachers typically use a signal to gain attention at the beginning of a class, activity or transition. The most effective signals are limited to one or two unambiguous cues such as a chime or clapping sequence. They can be visual (holding a sign or other prop) or aural. The most reliable signals do not depend on the classroom context (e.g., flicking the lights on and off), so they can be used outside the classroom as well.

Follow the signal to begin with a pause to scan the room to see who is focused. Consider asking students to respond to the signal by raising their hands, looking toward the teacher or making a verbal commitment such as “I’m listening.” Use a low-key method of gaining the attention of students who are not yet focused, and then offer a positive reinforcement such as a smile and/or thank you in response to quiet and visible attention.

Transitions between activities

Routines are needed when students are changing activities or settings; for example, moving from one activity to another, one location to another or one subject to another. An elementary or junior high classroom can have more than 30 transitions a day.

Sample strategies for transitions between activities

- *Build a preview of the day into the regular classroom routine.*
Students find it helpful to know the planned sequence of activities and expectations about time.
- *Use auditory cues.*
Use bells or egg timers to signal when to take a break or return to work.
- *Embed cues in the instructional routine.*
For example, five minutes before the dismissal bell, say “You have five more minutes before class ends so take out your agendas and write down your homework assignment.”
- *Work with individual students to establish specific parameters for transitions, and provide consistent and friendly reminders.*
For example, when students are leaving the classroom to go to the gymnasium, review:
 - how they will walk (quietly and at what pace)
 - with whom (by themselves or with an assigned partner, in the middle of the line or at the end of the line)
 - where (on right side of the hall).Students can practise this routine ahead of time.

- *Provide individual students with additional support during activity transitions.*
When moving from one location to another, give individual students a purpose to help them focus on something positive while moving. For example, ask a student to carry the teacher's clipboard to the gym or library books to the library.
- *Review behavioural expectations for a special presentation or visit by a guest speaker.*
Large gatherings and performances can be challenging situations for some students. Brainstorm what being a good audience member looks like and sounds like shortly before these situations.

Sample strategies for teaching students how to wait for help

- *Encourage students to continue with easier parts of tasks while waiting.*
For example, they could underline, highlight or rephrase directions before beginning a task.
- *Teach students to jot down key words or questions.*
This strategy will help students remember what they want to say as they wait for their turn. Sticky notes can be great tools for marking the spot in a book or writing down key words.
- *Give students substitute verbal or motor responses to make while waiting.*
For example, students may look at a book, colour or use worry beads.

Using momentum

Before asking students to do something they are less likely to want to do, first ask them to do several time-limited tasks they like. For example, before asking them to complete a written assignment or attempt a challenging math equation, have them solve a riddle on the board, share three ideas with a partner or make a pattern with math blocks.

Build momentum by starting the school day or a particular lesson with motivating activities such as reading a story. Whenever possible, also end a learning session with an activity students enjoy.

Response to particular behaviours

When certain behaviours repeatedly interfere with instruction, develop responses that minimize or circumvent the behaviour. Rather than trying to change students' behaviour, change your own behaviour.

For example, persistent calling out during classroom instruction can be frustrating for both the teacher and students who want to participate in discussion. Although calling out can have a place in the classroom (for example, during brainstorming activities), it can interfere with instruction, disrupt group discussion and allow a

small number of students to dominate and discourage less assertive students from participating. To minimize call-outs, be clear about when and how students should respond. For example, let them know that they will have time to think about their response and then be asked to discuss their answer with a partner.

Other creative ways to minimize call-outs include tossing a small ball to individual students who then respond, or randomly selecting a card from a box containing cards with all the students' names. These strategies encourage students to pay attention to the question and think about their response since they might be called upon. If individual students are uncomfortable with this approach, tell them in advance which question they will be asked and provide some "think time" so they can formulate a response.