

The Top 4 Priorities for the First 30 Days of School

Greetings! I am so glad you decided to receive this report. The most important 30 days of any school year are the first 30 days. During this time we, as teachers, establish our leadership of the class, build credibility, and work to create an emotionally safe, productive environment that values all children and holds them to high standards of work, effort, and behavior. In short, what happens during the first 30 days of school sets the tone for the rest of the year. As the old saying goes, we have only one chance to make this first impression.

This resource is designed to help you get off to a great start as you begin the coming school year. The report features four critical priorities that we need to focus on at the start of every school year and includes a series of action steps to take for each one. Giving these four priorities the time and emphasis they deserve will pay big dividends for you, your students, and their families.

If you are interested in learning more about how to emphasize the following four priorities, check out my e-book *The First 30 Days: Start Your School Year with 4 Priorities in Mind*. You can find the book in [PDF form](#) on my website and in [e-book form](#) on amazon. *The First 30 Days: Start Your School Year with 4 Priorities in Mind* includes detailed instructions, full activity descriptions, classroom samples, and other useful information that will help you implement the action steps I describe.

I hope you find this report beneficial to your teaching. Best of luck to you as you prepare for the coming school year.

Kindly,

Steve

www.steverEIFman.com

Priority #1: Establish procedures, routines, and expectations so students know how to function efficiently and effectively in your classroom.

Action Steps:

- **Identify and list the various procedures and routines your students need to know in order to function efficiently and effectively in your classroom.** I create my list by closing my eyes and visualizing a complete day's worth of activities from beginning to end. I then use the list to organize my training efforts at the beginning of the school year.
- **Set aside time during the first 4-6 weeks of the school year to train students thoroughly in these classroom procedures and routines.** Teach these expectations in context. As you introduce each aspect of the curriculum to your students, teach the routines, procedures, and policies that relate to it.
- **Follow these steps when teaching a new routine or procedure:** introduce the routine, discuss its importance, explain and model the steps, hold simulation activities whenever possible, provide multiple opportunities for students to practice, and hold students accountable for proper performance.
- **Keep this training period going until performing these routines and procedures becomes second nature for students.** The most common mistake teachers make with regard to training is ending the training period prematurely. If your students respond well to your initial efforts, resist the temptation to bring your training period to a halt. The extra time you take to build a foundation for quality learning will pay off. Effective training cannot be rushed.

Priority #2: Build a cooperative classroom culture through icebreaking and team-building activities so students feel safe and comfortable and see one another as friends and assets, not rivals.

Action Steps:

- **Serve as a consistent model of the habits, dispositions, and attitudes that you want to promote to your students.** Children are paying close attention to us at the beginning of each year. When we use a positive tone of voice, say *please* and *thank you*, and look out for the well-being of others, these gestures go a long way toward helping us create the type of classroom where we are all likely to feel comfortable and thrive.
- **Schedule several icebreaking and team-building activities during the first week of school so kids a chance to get to know one another in a structured, non-threatening manner.** One of my favorite examples is the well-known “People Hunt” activity found in Jeanne Gibbs’ wonderful book *Tribes*. In this activity each child receives a sheet with a list of descriptors. The goal is for students to walk around the room and collect the signatures of classmates who exemplify one or more of these descriptors. The “People Hunt” and other similar activities promote positive social interactions and create situations where students need to help one another.
- **Continue to schedule occasional icebreakers and team-builders over the next few weeks of school to continue the process of creating culture.** Spreading these activities out over the first weeks of school enables us to keep this priority in mind as we begin our academic work and continue emphasizing to our students the importance of establishing an upbeat, friendly classroom environment.

Priority #3: Establish a sense of purpose in your class so students understand why it's important to come to school each day and work hard. Children who understand the many purposes of their learning will behave better, work with greater motivation and enthusiasm, and find greater meaning in their work.

Action Steps:

- **Select a Classroom Aim that includes that your very highest priorities.** The Classroom Aim is a short phrase that provides focus and direction and begins to establish a sense of purpose with students. For many years the aim of my classroom has been: “Increasing learning while increasing enthusiasm.” Students appreciate being in an environment in which the teacher genuinely wants them to enjoy the learning process.

- **Have your students write a Class Mission Statement.** This is the single most powerful move teachers can make to establish purpose with students. A mission statement establishes a classroom’s identity, includes important goals and guiding principles, and describes the actions everyone needs to take each day to bring these ideas to life. I have my students write our mission statement during the first full week of the school year. At the end of that week, I take home all the kids’ papers and combine their contributions into one document that contains at least one idea from every child so that everyone feels a sense of ownership in the process.

- **Review the mission statement at least once a week for the entire year, both at predetermined times (such as every Monday morning) and to take advantage of teachable moments.** I incorporate these brief conversations into our morning circle time every Friday. The results are powerful. During this time we never read the whole statement. Instead, I ask my students to focus on a specific word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph. Once I have identified our focus for that morning, I will ask the students to offer examples of how they have brought that idea to life that week, describe how we can improve in that area, or connect that idea to some aspect of our classroom environment. Some weeks, instead of selecting a focus in advance, I ask the kids to share a part of the mission statement that happens to jump out to them. During these “open forum” conversations, students can choose a word or phrase from any paragraph and explain why it stood out to them.

Priority #4: Communicate with your students' families about the new year. Build a sense of excitement, optimism, and possibility as you share your plans for the coming months. Be proactive. Doing so gives you the opportunity to package your ideas and articulate them in the best possible light. Being proactive increases your credibility, strengthens your voice, and reaffirms your position of leadership.

Action Steps:

- **Begin the school year with a powerful gesture to capture parents' attention**, such as studying last year's yearbook to learn your students' names and faces before the first day of school or calling every family after the first day of school to introduce yourself and express how much you're looking forward to a great year.
- **Send home a detailed letter during the first week of school** introducing yourself, sharing your goals for the year, establishing your highest priorities as a teacher, and whetting parents' appetite for what's to come. Though I refer to it as the First Day Letter, it is a good idea to wait a few days before sending it home. On the first day of school, parents are usually so inundated with paperwork from the school office that a letter from you may get lost in the shuffle.
- **Ask parents to share with you information about their child's strengths, interests, and special abilities, as well as any concerns the parent or child may have.** As teachers, it is important to learn this information as early in the year as possible. I provide a sheet at the end of the First Day Letter and ask parents to write me a note, tear off the page, and have their child return it to school.
- **Send home a weekly or monthly newsletter to keep parents informed about important class structures, events, policies, and information.**

If you would like more information about these four priorities, including step-by-step instructions about training your students in class routines and procedures, sample icebreakers and team-building activities, detailed instructions about how to select a Classroom Aim and write a Class Mission Statement, and a sample First Day Letter and newsletter, check out my e-book *The First 30 Days: Start Your School Year with 4 Priorities in Mind*. You can find the book in [PDF form](#) on my website and in [e-book form](#) on amazon.

