

Building Fences

Pam Stephens

It's the first day of school. As a student-teacher, you probably haven't slept much in the past few days. Perhaps your biggest anxiety is classroom discipline. How will you gain and maintain control of your classroom? This is a common fear and one that experience will help you to overcome.

Experienced teachers know that the first days of school are when the tone for the entire year is set. This is called building fences, an indirect reference to a proverb that states,

"Good fences make good neighbors." Conversely, bad fences can easily make not-so-good neighbors.

What follows are a few pointers that will help you to build some strong fences.

1. Greet students at the door. This lets students know that you are eager to meet them and get to know them.

2. Be prepared to introduce yourself. Show an example of your artwork or a photo of your family or pet. Keep your introduction brief and non-controversial.

3. Your cooperating teacher will likely establish procedures on the first day. This means setting clear behavior guidelines and letting students know in clear terms what is expected of them. If you are asked to contribute to the rules or to assist students with setting them, keep in mind that three or four rules can cover the entire gamut. Avoid developing a lengthy list of rules that state what students cannot do.

4. Learn the name of each student as soon as possible. Address students by name. This builds a sense of mutual trust and respect. It also reminds rowdy students that you know who they are. If you have hundreds of names to learn, create seating charts to use as cheat sheets.

5. When it is your turn to take over the class, introduce an activity that will create a sense of community. For example, have an icebreaker activity that encourages an exchange of communication between and among your students and you. Art criticism and aesthetic discussions can often be developed into these sorts of activities that can help students learn tolerance for diverse opinions.

6. It is human nature for people to want to be liked, but you must remember that you are a teacher, not a buddy. You do not need to be a pal in order for your students to like you. In fact, being too friendly (especially when you are building first-of-the-year

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Sample Classroom Rules

1. Be prepared to learn.
2. Respect the space and people around you.
3. Be on time, every time.
4. Act in a manner that builds others up.

fences) can cause the opposite reaction. Avoid allowing students to use your first name. Formal address maintains a more professional environment.

There are other approaches to building first-of-the-year fences. Get hints from your cooperating teacher or other teachers on your campus. Regardless of the techniques and strategies that each teacher uses, you will probably find a sense of consistency and fairness among them. Remember: No matter how you build your fences, you must maintain them with a fair and even hand. ☺

Pam Stephens is a member of the SchoolArts Advisory Board. She coordinates the art education program at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff. Pamela.Stephens@nau.edu

Illustration by Jim McNeill.

