

**K-8
ADMINISTRATORS**

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

BUILDING A POSITIVE CLASSROOM CULTURE:

Strategies for Effective Classroom Management

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**CREATING CLASSROOMS
WHERE CURIOSITY, CREATIVITY,
AND CRITICAL THINKING THRIVE!**



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Creating a strong classroom community is an integral part of teaching the whole child. This foundational aspect of the learning environment not only fosters a sense of belonging and connectedness but also significantly contributes to academic success and social development. A supportive and inclusive classroom community encourages students to collaborate, share ideas, and engage in active learning, ultimately enhancing their overall educational experience.

When building a positive classroom culture, consider these three pillars: community, content, and conduct. Comparable to a 3-legged stool, each pillar plays a necessary role in building a sturdy and supportive foundation. Have your teachers follow these three pillars of classroom culture, you can ensure that your students feel like they belong, are engaged in their learning, and are respectful of the rules and everyone in the room.

Pillar 1: Community

Daily engagement with each student significantly enhances their sense of belonging. Additionally, fostering a culture of connectivity between students and their teacher is crucial. Employing techniques to establish personal connections within the classroom promotes the formation of relationships that contribute to a safe and inclusive environment. Building these relationships need not be an extensive process. Have your teachers consider the following strategies to help build community in their classrooms:

- **Greet Every Student, Everyday:** If we want students to be curious, they first have to feel that their ideas and their wonderings matter. Have teachers make an effort to greet every student every day. Encourage them to look each student in the eye and welcome them to your classroom. It's a small gesture that makes a big impact.
- **Hallway Conversations:** Instead of having "check-in" conversations with students in the physical confines of the classroom, surrounded by the listening ears of their peers, teachers can take time on a weekly basis to pull each student out into the hall and chat about anything that is on their mind.
- **Handshakes, Hugs, and High-Fives:** Connecting with students as soon as they enter the classroom can make their whole day. Teachers should greet students at the door every morning with a hug, handshake, or high five. As teachers get to know their students better, they can get creative with it: developing handshakes or "hellos" that are unique to each student!
- **Post-It Check-Ins:** Students value individualized feedback. By giving students a Post-It note prior to a scheduled follow-up, it lets them know their teacher values their input and are eager to hear about their progress. And by "sticking" to an adhesive note, it limits teachers to just an important idea or two.
- **Curiosity Networks:** A classroom is only as strong as its connections. Teachers can help strengthen the collaboration in their classroom with these powerful grouping strategies. Teachers can check out [these strategies](#) for forming curiosity networks, including Think, Pair, Share, Jigsaw, Truth Contagion, Diverse Groups, and many more!
- **The Cheerful Baboon:** Every time you say the word "baboon," you can't help but smile. Teachers can bring some extra smiles to their classroom by incorporating a little baboonery! Instead of saying, "Good morning," they can say "Merry baboon to you, my friend." Challenge teachers to find other ways to create routines that use the word baboon — they'll be amazed at the results. Check it out in action [here!](#)

- **Perspective Taking:** Students come into the classroom with all different kinds of perspectives. We should celebrate those perspectives, rather than shying away from them. Have teachers show a picture that could be interpreted in two or more ways. Then, have students share their perspective and then allow for the class to respectfully debate their points of view. As students learn about others and their perspectives around an interpretation of a picture, they will start to become more open to listening to others as they progress through the year.

Pillar 2: Content

Engaging students in the process of learning is key to their growth. If students are not interested in learning the content, it can be difficult to instill that positive classroom culture. Help students engage in the content by using these powerful strategies. As students' thirst for knowledge grows, the classroom culture flourishes as well.

- **Wonder Wall:** When teachers start a new topic, have students share their questions or wonderings about it. Teachers can display these wonderings on a "wall". As they work through the unit, teachers can revisit the wall periodically and challenge the class to discuss it. Having questions visible in the classroom promotes curiosity and student engagement.
- **Idea Snowball:** It is best to utilize a variety of collaborative structures to develop and refine ideas. Use individual think time for their students to reflect on a reading, video, or topic. Then they can use small group time for students to share their thoughts with others and develop their ideas and, finally, use whole group time for discussion that allows for refinement of learning. Like a snowball rolling down a hill, each structure adds layers of insight to the original idea.
- **Peer Teaching:** Encourage teachers to allow students who understand a concept first to teach it to others. Not only do they get the advantage of having multiple miniature assistants, but this can also help the "teachers" solidify their understanding by articulating it for others!
- **Start with the End:** Instead of showing students the pathway to answer a question, teachers can allow them to construct their own understanding. Teachers start by presenting students with a question they hope they will be able to solve at the end of a lesson. Then, students work individually and in groups to solve it. This strategy helps students to put their thinking to the test, without the teacher encouraging one particular type of solution. Students explain their thinking and teachers facilitate a discussion, helping students to see where their solutions went wrong, and where they were right.
- **Work Logs:** Let's get organized! To help support group work and time management, students track their group and individual progress by using work logs to keep them organized and on track. Teachers can check in periodically to support effective use of the logs!
- **Four Essentials of Inquiry:** Leading with inquiry-based lessons will help increase your students "buy-in" to the content being taught. Have teachers consider the four essentials for inquiry and reflect on how they are approaching the different categories. Teachers should think about the questions they are posing to their students and how the four essentials for inquiry might change those. Challenge your teachers to get their students to ask the same questions!
- **Project-Based Learning:** Using units that are authentic with real-world connections allows students to acquire deeper knowledge about content and gives them a sense of purpose while they are learning. Project-based learning helps to incorporate cross-curricular ideas and even lets the students help to make the world a better place.

Pillar 3: Conduct

Displaying empathy can be profoundly impactful when dealing with students who are not performing at their best, for any number of reasons. Offering compassion coupled with setting clear objectives, can guide students towards the behaviors and outcomes expected in the classroom. Every student (and educator) can have an off day. Keeping students focused on the task at hand can be challenging, but it is important for classroom culture. These strategies will help teachers to focus students as well as create a space that is safe for everyone.

- Brain-gauging Transitions:** We spend lots of time transitioning from one activity to another. Figure out how to keep minds engaged by adding academic content to these transition times. For instance, while walking down the hall, have teachers instruct younger students to silently count their steps by twos or fives. For older students, have them estimate the amount of time it takes them to clean up after an activity.
- Flexify Your Rules:** Shrink the list of rules — no more than five — and make them more flexible. Instead of saying, “Turn your work in on time. Be on time for class. Bring the necessary materials,” say, “Do your best.” Instead of saying, “No hitting. No kicking. No biting. No eye gouging. No insults or name-calling,” say, “Be kind.” These broader rules are applicable to a wider range of issues.
- “But What Did I Say?”:** Teachers should never argue. When students attempt to engage. Have teachers simply listen, nod empathetically, and say, “But what did I say?” If they continue to argue, have them repeat, “But what did I say?” Be caring and be consistent, and this approach will work wonders!
- Shake Your Sillies Out:** Do your teachers have an activity coming up that might cause your kids to get silly? Have teachers create space for them to be energetic and silly by taking a designated “Shake Your Sillies Out” time! Keeping your sillies in silly times can help students focus when it's time to be serious!
- Marble Jar:** Keeping a jar in the front of the room can help teachers tremendously. Have teachers place a marble in the jar when the class is on task and is showing self-direction. Teachers determine how many marbles it takes for the class to “earn” some extra minutes of recess, free reading time, or another sought-after reward. This is a great visual to remind students that we are all on the same team.
- The Horn of Silence:** Do your teachers need a creative, engaging way to get your students' attention when they're engaged in conversation? Have teachers create a horn out of a tube from wrapping paper. Have them blow into it like a horn to make a fun noise and establish the expectation that students will wind down their conversations by the time they get to the end of the note. For an added wrinkle, have teachers slide one tube over top of the other and play different notes, and use it as an excuse to learn about sound and pitch.
- Classroom Cash:** Have your teachers incentivize your students to go above and beyond by creating classroom cash that can be given out or taken away based on how well they control their controllable behaviors. To be more creative, teachers can replace Washington and Lincoln's faces with your own – or with your school mascot – and give it a fun name, like “Cougar Cash.”
- Classroom Contract:** Have teachers brainstorm a contract for them and their students to abide by throughout the year. Have students come up with pieces of it, as they determine what they want their classroom environment to look like. Have teachers encourage students to think about how they want to be treated and remind them that you will also be following the contract “bylaws”. This will help strengthen students' positive behaviors and create a safe environment for everyone.

In Conclusion...

Everything becomes secondary when a student feels as if they don't belong or feels disconnected from their peers and teacher. Following the three pillars of classroom culture (Community, Content, and Conduct), we can start to form that positive classroom environment, and support our students in becoming the best version of themselves.



3 Pillars of a Positive Classroom Culture

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