

## **ORGANIZATION TIPS FOR PRIMARY AND JUNIOR CLASSROOMS:**

Your Real Estate Agent will tell you when you first go to purchase a new house, the three most important things to remember are “location, location, location.”

As a teacher, you have the privilege of being able to set up and organize your own work space. This workspace, your classroom, is one of the most important tools you have in your teaching toolbox. You can use it to enhance your teaching and promote learning opportunities for your students. And, like real estate, there are three important rules to remember in your classroom setting as well. Those rules are “organize, organize, organize.”

When setting up my classroom I found it helpful to focus on three areas:

1. Organizing Your Space
2. Organizing Your Materials
3. Organizing Your Time

### **1. Organizing Your Space:**

Before you begin to set up your classroom take a little time to just sit in the space. Make your observations both as a teacher and as a student who will be working in this environment. Note the physical characteristics of the space you will be using. Where are the electrical outlets, sink, windows, T.V. monitors, exits, permanent shelves and bulletin boards?

#### **Take a moment to consider these questions:**

- Where might I put my desk so that I can still make eye contact with my students?
- Is my Art Centre near my sink for easy cleanup?
- Is my Audio Centre near an electrical outlet?
- Have I planned a space for a “Hundred’s Rug” or a large group teaching area?
- Where will I place my Learning Stations?
- Would I like my quiet reading area near a window?
- Would my students benefit from a small rug and pillows at my reading centre?
- Would I like an area to grow plants?
- Have I considered all my students’ various learning styles; visual, kinesthetic, auditory and any special needs?
- Where will I need to place my computer station?
- What will my traffic patterns look like? Are they unobstructed?
- Am I able to see and reach all my students quickly and easily?
- What seating arrangement works best for my students and my program?
- How will my floor plan best suit the needs of the grade I am teaching?

#### **Student desk placement:**

Your students’ desks can be arranged in a variety of ways; rows, small groups, U shape. I found small groups worked well for me. It allowed me to place students with various strengths in each group. I often changed these groups for different units. This allowed students the opportunity to work with various members of the class, forming new relationships and interacting with students of different interests. It was also helpful to “change it up” simply when everyone in a group just became too chatty and the socialization factor was beginning to overtake the learning!

## **2. Organizing Your Materials:**

If you are moving into an existing classroom, allow yourself some time to go through the existing cupboards and shelves. Take stock of what you might have inherited. Empty everything out. Put back what you would like to use for your specific program. You never know, you might even find some hidden gems! I would make a "Free Giveaway," sign and display everything I was not going to use so that other teachers had a chance to share. Sometimes what does not work for you might work for someone else.

Storage is a challenge in most classrooms. One of the first things you might do to help you with this task, is talk to your school principal or administrator and inquire if it is possible to purchase some educational equipment that may assist you in your classroom organization. Some teachers prefer to purchase their own core teaching materials. This allows them to choose specifically the equipment that suits their teaching style. What is more important, they can take these items with them if they move to a new teaching assignment.

### **Teaching Easel:**

One of the most important teaching tools I used was my Teaching Easel. This fundamental piece of equipment should allow you to store materials used for daily lessons. Mine included a book ledge, big book storage, magnetic white board and chart paper storage. I was able to use the shelves and pull out bins to store student books and a large variety of lesson materials.

### **Book Shelving and Racks:**

You will likely have a classroom library with a wide variety of books for your students. This will present one of your biggest organizational challenges. When you are thinking about storage you will need to designate space for books, books and more books! You may choose shelves, bins or specific "library styled" book racks. Remember, a good labeling system is your best friend.

### **Student Mailboxes or Cubbies:**

Many Primary and Junior classroom teachers find it very beneficial to have individual student "Cubbies" or "Mailboxes." It is useful to have a space or bin designated in your mailbox area for extra notices. A few of your students just might need that second form! Some teachers even like to locate "in" and "out" boxes in this area for student assignments. These mailboxes can help to organize student work, notices, agendas, books, personal items, and hopefully not forgotten lunch items! There are a wide variety of "Cubbies" including teacher made units using cereal boxes and purchased units made from wood, plastic or new soft sided fabric storage systems.

### **Guided Reading Storage:**

If you are using a Guided Reading Program in your class, you will want to devise a storage system which allows you to catalogue and store the many leveled reading texts to be used in your program. Whether you use bags, divided bins, tubs or folders, you will want to ensure that you have a clear method of labeling all your materials.

**Manipulative Materials:**

Most teachers today are fortunate enough to have many “manipulative” materials in the classroom. These may be stored in a variety of ways, using shelves with bins and tubs, plastic drawer units, even coffee cans. These materials will be easier for you and your students to use if they are clearly labelled. If you have an early Primary class you might find it helpful to label using both words and “Rebus pictures.” This allows your students greater independence and promotes their reading skills. This will also enable your students to assist with classroom clean up without classroom chaos! You may find it helpful to designate specific areas for various types of “manipulatives,” for example, at a station or centre for Writing, Mathematics, Science or Dramatic Presentation.

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**Paper work:**

You will also want to designate space to store student records, parent communications and relevant material for each student in your class. I purchased inexpensive red and blue duotang folders, laminated them for longevity and labelled one for each student in my class. By having girls and boys folders colour coded, you can quickly locate specific files, at interview or reporting times. These laminated folders can be re-labelled and used for many years.

One advantage of our digital age is the ability to store a large amount of material electronically. Your lesson plans, unit plans, specific unit assignments, rubrics and student records can all be stored with the assistance of a computer. This eliminates the need for reams of paper and helps us move towards a “greener” system. Just as a safe guard you may want to back up your important files on a disk or memory stick.

**Messages:**

You may also find it practical to set up a classroom “Message Board.” A magnetic white board is very convenient for this application. This will help organize your students, listing homework, reminders, important dates and even daily thoughts.

By having all your teaching materials well organized and labelled in such a way that they can be retrieved quickly, you eliminate waiting times for your students. This will help your lessons flow. As we know, students, like most of us, become restless and lose focus if they are required to sit and wait too long, so it is important to have necessary lesson materials at your finger tips.

### **3. Organizing Your Time:**

If you have taken the time to organize your space and materials wisely, you already have a head start on organizing your time.

#### **“Timely Tips:”**

Two weeks before the start of class I liked to send a “Welcome Back” letter to my students. Kids always love to get mail. Introduce yourself to them. Tell them a bit about your program. Excite them. Invite them to bring in a picture of one of their summer activities to share on the first day. Encourage drawings. Include a short survey letter for parents. Ask them to describe one goal they might have for their child during the upcoming year. This helps you get to know a bit about your students and parents from the very first day. You can take your students’ pictures and make a great first week bulletin board display. Don’t forget to include your own summer picture.

Before school begins organize any sets of classroom books you will need, such as journals, mathematics, language arts and printing. Remember to set aside a few extra prepared books for any new students who may arrive during the year.

Prepare birthday cards for all of your students ahead of time, especially if you are teaching a primary class. If you file these cards, starting with dates at the beginning of the year to the end of the school year, they are all ready for you to hand out on a student’s special day. Kids love to discover small packages of stickers tucked in these cards.

Print sheets of “praise” labels for each of your students. These can be printed off and stored in your records binder. Use these “praise labels,” on notebooks, agendas, assignments and in personal notes. It’s a quick and easy way to track how many times you have recognized your students’ individual achievements. We can never get too much praise!

I found it helpful to prepare my spelling word lists by the week, but I sent my lists home in 4-5 week sets, on the back of my monthly newsletter. This helped ensure the newsletter arrived home, and also gave ample opportunity for review of spelling words with parents or guardians. You could also post these lists on a classroom website.

During the first week of school focus on establishing your classroom routines, and expectations rather than trying to dive right into the curriculum. Send home your list of expectations regarding homework, agendas, lunch money, trips, etc. Remember, parents are your best teaching partners. Keep them informed.

As a class, formulate a few basic rules to live and learn by. Have the students make these 3-4 rules into a poster to be displayed in class. Remember to share these rules with home. Review these rules daily during the first week.

Introduce your students to a few “quieting” or “gaining attention” techniques, such as hand claps, chimes, finger cymbals or a small bell. Just be creative. I could always guarantee my students’ attention by singing to them. This was always their favourite. Whatever you use, be sure to change it up throughout the year to increase the fun.

Noise reduction hint:

I found it very helpful to minimize the distraction of scraping chairs, by placing a used tennis ball on each foot of my students’ chairs. The kids loved them. They thought it gave their chairs a “Space Age” look.

**Final Note:**

However you decide to structure your classroom, it must be a reflection of you and your individual teaching style. In the end a well organized classroom can save you time and energy for the more inspiring and rewarding task of guiding and teaching students.

Carol Schenk  
Educational Consultant  
Copernicus Educational Products