
RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM NEWSLETTER

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Our Hopes and Dreams for School

Asking students to articulate their hopes for the year is a powerful way to build community, foster ownership, and set the stage for creating classroom rules

"What are your hopes for this school year?"

Many teachers using the *Responsive Classroom* approach ask students this question at the start of every school year.

While the question may seem simple, posing it to students and asking them to share their responses can have a profound effect on the classroom. Just think about the messages inherent in the question: what you care about matters at school; your hopes and goals are taken seriously; you have a say in what we'll learn.

Taking the time to help children articulate their hopes for school—or their "hopes and dreams," as they're often called—sets a tone of collaboration and mutual respect. It fosters reflection and self-knowledge by prompting children to ask themselves questions such as "What's important to me at school? What do I want to learn more about? What's easy for me? What's hard for me? What do I want to get better at?"

Sharing hopes and dreams also creates a meaningful context for establishing classroom rules. Once hopes have been articulated, discussions can begin about what rules will be needed to help everyone's hopes and dreams come true.

In older grades, the teacher might ask, "If these are our hopes, what rules will we need in order to make these hopes come true?" In younger grades, "How can we take care of ourselves and each other so that we can all do what we hope to do in school?" In this way, rules become logical outgrowths of the students' and teachers' goals rather than directives handed down from above.

The process of articulating hopes and dreams varies depending on the age of the children and the teacher's style. Below are adapted excerpts from *The First Six Weeks of School* by Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete offering ideas for third through sixth graders. The Teacher to Teacher article on pages 6–7 offers ideas for primary grade students.

Hopes and Dreams, Grades 3–4

(from chapter one of *The First Six Weeks of School*)

We begin thinking about our hopes and dreams after we've had a day or two to get to know each other. The depth and honesty of sharing increases after an initial sense of community has been developed and children have a sense of what school will be like this year.

I begin our discussion by sharing my own hopes for our year together. As a class, we then do some initial brain-storming of what our hopes and dreams might be. I want

to engage the children's thinking, but I don't want them to commit to final goals until they have had a chance to reflect more deeply. This deeper reflection will increase the quality and usefulness of the goals they choose.

Individually, children fill out a worksheet to guide their thinking. The worksheet asks them to list or draw:

- Their favorite thing to do in school last year
- The hardest thing for them about school last year
- Something they would change about what they did in school last year
- Something they're really looking forward to this year
- Something they're a little worried about this year

Next the children share their worksheets with a partner. Verbalizing their ideas and listening to the ideas of another often help children develop their thinking.

A lesson on symbols

We continue the process with a lesson on symbols, a concept I know we will be using in our work with mapping, math, and language arts this year. We define the word "symbol" and list some of the symbols we encounter in our daily lives—road signs, logos, no smoking signs.

Next, we brainstorm several ways to symbolize ideas such as "reading," "hard work," and "friendship." Several students share their most important hope for this year, and the symbols they might use to represent this hope. Then each child develops a symbol for his/her most important hope and creates a final draft of it on a precut square of drawing paper. Children present these symbols to the class. We then organize them into a "patchwork quilt," which gets displayed on the wall.

Hopes and Dreams, Grades 5–6

(from chapter one of *The First Six Weeks of School*)

Fifth- and sixth-graders take longer than younger students to develop the sense of safety and trust with classmates and teachers that sharing genuine hopes and dreams requires. Therefore, I don't begin until near the end of the first week, and I begin with a concrete and non-threatening exercise.

Beginning by mapping

I begin with a simple mapping exercise. Students make a map of their previous year's classroom. They then create a key with symbols showing areas of the old classroom that represent:

- Something about school they enjoyed
- Something about school that was hard or unpleasant
- Something that they'd like to work on this year

The exercise supports our geography curriculum while it asks children to reflect upon their previous year of school. Telling a classmate about her/his map lets a student share personal information and feelings in a fairly nonthreatening way.

To conclude this process, students write a paragraph about their most important hope for school this year. After reviewing paragraph formation, students write their final drafts. Finally, I ask students to identify actions that they will take to help them accomplish their goal and actions that others can take to help them as well. We all need the support of others to achieve our hopes and dreams.

Helping those who resist

For children this age, as self-consciousness increases and identity questions loom, defensiveness also increases. If they fear the judgment or, worse, the laughter of peers, some children may assert a superficial or unrealistic desire for the school year, such as "I hope I get to play computer games all day." Some may try to make a joke of the whole process by naming a goal of "having the school turn into the mall," or "having recess all day."

Waiting until day four to begin working on hopes and dreams avoids much of this behavior. By then, most students will have decided that it is safe to share their real hopes, although a few may still need redirection. I handle the resisters with a combination of a light touch and serious intent.

Though you might well wish for school to turn into a video arcade, William, it isn't likely to happen—not this year, at least! But I really want school to be a place where all students find enjoyment and get to work at things that really matter to them. I believe there are things within the realm of possibility that you could name, things that we could help come true. Do you want to think some more on your own, or would you like me to make some suggestions?" At William's invitation, I wonder whether something having to do with our small but growing computer center might appeal to him, an idea William endorses. His final draft expresses that he wants to

spend as much time as he can learning about computers this year. While not all conversations proceed quite so directly to an enthusiastic investment, I have found that students do welcome the invitation to comment about what matters to them in school when they are assured of a respectful audience.

These excerpts are adapted from [*The First Six Weeks of School*](#) (2000) by Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete.

Our Hopes and Dreams for Grade 2

Larry hopes he can learn the most things he can.

David hopes he can do some really fun projects.

Ashley wants to learn to count money.

Asia wants to learn how to do math.

Jamal hopes he learns everyone's names.

LiPing wants to learn about the globe.

Monet hopes to improve her attitude and be an honor roll student.

Kenneth hopes he learns how to draw all different things.

Rayshea hopes to do art activities.

Kaylin hopes to learn about animals.

Daniela wants to read a lot.

Azeb wants to learn about inches and centimeters.

Daphne wants to do lots of work.

Jessica hopes to learn how to read.

Lourdes hopes that we get to draw.

Nadia hopes to do lots of math.

Allyson hopes she learns how to spell.

Briana hopes she reads chapter books.

Willy hopes he can follow the rules.

Ms. Zimmerman hopes everyone will feel safe in school, will take care of each other, and will be thinking workers.

A chart of students' hopes and dreams is displayed all year long in this second grade classroom.

Musical Hopes and Dreams

By Jennifer Fichtel, Responsive Classroom consulting teacher, Fitchburg Public Schools

Hundreds of drawings of children playing instruments, singing, dancing, and toe tapping adorn the walls, bulletin boards, and closet doors of Donna Dik's music classroom. Beautiful to look at—rich in color, detail, and whimsy—these illustrations represent the "hopes and dreams" of Donna's students at Reingold Elementary School. In the center of each cluster of drawings is a list of the children's hopes for music class: James hopes to sing a song about fishing; Erik hopes to play the electric guitar; Nou Tsa hopes to sing and dance; Natasha hopes to be in a musical performance.

When Donna began the school year—her first as a music teacher at Reingold Elementary—she was faced with the daunting task of getting to know more than 600 students in grades 1–4. She turned to the idea of "hopes and dreams," a strategy she had learned while attending a *Responsive Classroom* Weeklong Institute. "I couldn't think of a better way to begin to get to know my students and to let them know that I cared about their interests and ideas," says Donna.

During her first meeting with each class, Donna expressed her hopes for music class and asked students to express theirs. She recorded their answers and provided materials for students to draw themselves achieving their hopes. Before long, the classroom was transformed into an art gallery as children from each class added their creations to the display. But that wasn't all that was transformed, according to Donna. "The process—which only took one class period per group—created a sense of shared purpose and set a positive tone that lasted an entire year."

Donna keeps the drawings up all year long, along with the Reingold school-wide constitution. Created by a group of students in the fall, the constitution lists a set of rules that everyone in the school agrees to follow. In addition to using the constitution as a guideline for behavior in music class, Donna frequently draws students' attention to the connection between the school-wide constitution and their hopes and dreams. In this way, she helps them understand how honoring the rules of the community helps all students achieve their hopes and dreams.

"What started as a way for me to get to know the students," says Donna, "has become a wonderful way to build a community of learners."

Four Goals of the First Six Weeks of School

"Doing hopes and dreams" is just one component of the early weeks curriculum suggested in *The Responsive Classroom* approach. In *The First Six Weeks of School*, co-authors, Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete outline the goals of the early weeks of school in the following way:

Though the details differ with different age groups, with the content of the curriculum, and with the organization of the room, there are four broad aims in the first six weeks curriculum:

1. *Create* a climate and tone of warmth and safety.
2. *Teach* the schedule and routines of the school day and expectations for behavior.
3. *Introduce* students to the physical environment and materials of the classroom and the school, and teach students how to use and care for them.
4. *Establish* expectations about ways we will learn together in the year ahead.

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