

# 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. It's one way to build a foundation for productive learning all year long. In this article, we offer ideas for how to use the "Hopes and Dreams" process in three grade ranges as well as in a music classroom.*

## Our Hopes and Dreams for School

"What are your hopes for this school year?"

Many teachers using *The Responsive Classroom*<sup>™</sup> 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. Here are some ideas for *the primary grades, grades 3-4, grades 5-6, and a music classroom*.

### **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 their book, *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.

## **Hopes and Dreams in a Primary Classroom**

Creating a paper quilt of children's hopes for the school year offers lessons in language arts, math, and working as a group

*By Paula Stafford*

*First grade teacher at Murphy School in Chicago, Illinois, and a Responsive Classroom consulting teacher*

I love the beginning of each school year with the coming of fresh new faces so excited to learn. Most of my students have been to kindergarten and come to first grade with some ideas and expectations about what they'll be doing there. But they also come with an eagerness to discover all the new things that first grade has to offer.

One of the ways I launch each school year is with the process of creating hopes and dreams (see lead article for an overview). In my classroom, the process takes several weeks and involves lessons in literacy and math along with learning about school expectations, classmates, and how we'll work together as a group.

I find that taking my time with this process is essential to making it meaningful for children this age. Before ever beginning a discussion of hopes and dreams, I take time to explore and expand children's ideas about what they'll be doing in first grade.

## **Reading books about school**

During the first few weeks, we read and discuss books about first grade, school, friendships, and learning. Here are some of my personal favorites:

*Leo the Late Bloomer* by Robert Krauss

*Franklin Goes to School* by Paulette Bourgeois

*My Friends* by Taro Gomi

*Friends at School* by Rochelle Burnette

*Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* and *Chrysanthemum*, both by Kevin Henkes

As we read and reflect on these stories, children expand their notions about school. They also begin to get to know one another and feel comfortable sharing their ideas in a group. Many of my students come to school with limited verbal skills. Reading and discussing books is a great way for them to build their vocabulary and get more comfortable expressing themselves verbally. Then when the time comes to share hopes and dreams, they can do so in a genuine way.

While reading these books about school, we also explore our school environment. During the first two weeks, we take whole-group tours of the school. We also tour each center in our classroom, visiting the math center, science/social studies center, writing center, library area, listening center, and art cart. Students notice the supplies and materials found there and offer ideas about what kind of learning might take place at each center. We complete these classroom tours by choosing a good spot for each center's label.

## **Introducing hopes and dreams**

Once students are comfortable with the classroom and their classmates, I begin the discussion of hopes and dreams. This conversation typically occurs over many days. I might begin by asking a general question about hopes, such as "What does it mean to hope for something?" or "Have you ever hoped for anything?"

Then I ask students to think specifically about what they hope for in first grade. Each day, five students respond while I record their words on chart paper. I feel it's important to keep this activity short, even though this means it takes a good four to five days to get everyone's input. Many six-year-olds have a hard time sitting for longer than fifteen minutes at the beginning of the year.

To integrate early literacy skills, I use a repeating pattern of text to record children's ideas. For example, I might write:

Mary said, "I hope I learn to read books."

Joey said, "I hope I learn to count to 100."

Anita said, "I hope I make lots of friends."

Each day we re-read the list as a group before adding more students' hopes until everyone has had a chance to contribute. In the process, students begin to recognize one another's names and common sight words.

### **"I hope I learn to ride a big bike"**

I want children's hopes to be related to school and to be attainable. When introducing hopes and dreams, I ask students to think specifically about things they hope to do or accomplish this year in school.

Still, some children will need more guidance making their hope school-related. When a child expresses a hope such as wanting "to learn to ride a big bike" or for "my dad to come back soon," I acknowledge the importance of the hope and ask him/her to think of another hope that can be achieved in school. This is essential because these hopes and dreams will later become the springboard for creating classroom rules.

### **The beginnings of a quilt**

Each year we create a bulletin board display of the children's hopes and dreams so that we can refer to them all year. Last year I decided to create a paper hopes and dreams quilt to hang over an old chalkboard we never use.

First, I laid butcher-block paper over long worktables for children to make first draft illustrations of their hopes for the year. As they drew, I wrote their sentences next to the illustrations and then asked them to point to the words and read the sentence with me. Later they did the same with a partner. The children enjoyed the process of working side-by-side with classmates and sharing their pictures and hopes informally with one another.

Next I cut a paper quilt square for each child and typed his/her sentence on it. When students received their squares, I asked them to read the sentence to themselves and to ask for help if they had trouble with any words. They then read their sentence aloud to the group. Because children had practiced reading to themselves first, they were able to read to the group quickly and confidently. Now the students were ready to do their final illustrations on their quilt squares.

### **Adding color and detail**

Understanding that these pictures would be displayed in the classroom, children were eager to do their best work. This provided a good opportunity to talk about what it meant to do quality work. Students offered ideas about making the picture go with the words, making it colorful and detailed, and taking their time. As children worked, I moved from table to table, noticing and encouraging their efforts. As children finished, they shared their quilt piece with classmates.

The final step was to make the border for each quilt piece using shapes and patterns. This activity dovetailed nicely with our math curriculum. Children glued their quilt pieces onto the center of another paper square. They then created different patterns around the border using pattern

blocks. Once they found a pattern they liked, they copied the pattern onto the border using crayons or colored pencils.

We placed the squares onto a large red sheet of butcher-block paper and proudly hung our quilt on the wall. The children had worked hard and had learned a lot about classmates, school expectations, working together, reading, writing, and shapes and patterns. We were well on our way to building a sense of community and ready now to create our classroom rules. That would be the work of the coming weeks.

## Hopes and Dreams, Grades 3-4

*From chapter one of The First Six Weeks of School by Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete  
Published by Northeast Foundation for Children, Greenfield, Massachusetts, 2000.*

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 by Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete. Published by Northeast Foundation for Children, Greenfield, Massachusetts, 2000.*

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 nonthreatening 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.

## **Musical Hopes and Dreams**

*By Jennifer Fichtel, NEFC 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."