**9-21-22 Relationship Building From Day** 1

**CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

Relationship Building From Day 1

Strategies for fostering relationships with middle and high school students starting on the first day of the school year and then growing them all year long.

By [Kimberly Hager](https://www.edutopia.org/profile/kimberly-hager), [Sarah Arenz](https://www.edutopia.org/profile/sarah-arenz)

July 6, 2022



SDI Productions / iStock

Teachers often spend time early in the school year building relationships with students, but this needs to be a yearlong endeavor. To that end, the two of us, high school English teacher Kimberly and middle school English language arts and social studies teacher Sarah, teamed up to help new, and not so new, teachers with growing relationships over the long term.

**FIRST DAY**

The best way to begin building relationships is to learn students’ names as quickly as possible. You might be the only adult in school in that student’s day to use their name in a positive way, so there’s great power in learning names quickly. During all activities on day one, we both quiz ourselves on students’ names. Kim uses her roster to try to match names to faces and then during class puts it away to see how many she remembers. Sarah uses a yearbook to start matching faces with names, so that when students walk in, she can greet them by name. Ultimately the goal is to know students’ names by the end of the first day. While we may not have learned all of the names by day two, we’re well on our way to scoring 100 percent by the end of the week.

Additionally, we prioritize relationship-building activities on day one over traditional first-day activities such as giving pretests, going over a syllabus, or handing out textbooks. For example, we have students fill out a sheet with information such as their favorite and least favorite foods, any pets and their names, etc. This information can be the basis for a classmate trivia game, which is great to play during the days before a break..

**FIRST WEEK**

As we continue to roll through week one and shift to academics, we create ways to continue building relationships through academic activities. We both teach ELA and use personal narrative writing, journaling, and sharing favorite books to build relationships and see where students are with their writing and reading.

Finding ways to get to know students in other content areas may require creativity. For social studies in the upcoming school year, Sarah plans on asking students to write their personal history or create a timeline of their life, perhaps sharing their favorite historical figure and explaining why they chose that person. Not only would something like this help teachers continue to get to know their students, but also it would help to build relationships among students and develop a sense of classroom community.

**FIRST MONTH**

In the first month we work to learn at least one nonacademic fact about each student. Sometimes we do this in conjunction with academic activities, and other times we have a simple conversation during nonstructured moments.

For accountability, Kim uses the list of students at the end of month one and goes through the names and writes down everything she remembers about each student. Sarah makes sure to schedule time with her professional-learning community by the end of the first month to compare notes with her team. Both methods keep a focus on building relationships and help identify those students we might still need to connect with.

**KEEPING A FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS THE REST OF THE YEAR**

As the school year progresses, it’s easy to end up focused on just the standards. It’s equally important, however, to keep a focus on building relationships. We utilize the first few minutes of class to continue to learn about students.

Sarah uses the days-of-the-week activities to start the day. Tuesdays “This or That” or “Tuesday Thought” gets students excited to begin their day with a quick share. With Tuesdays “This or That,” Sarah asks students for their opinions about two random but sometimes connected things (e.g., beach vacation or mountain vacation, reading or writing, PS4 or Xbox etc.), and students raise their hands to answer. We then spend a few minutes talking about the reason for their choice.

Tuesday’s Thought consists of Sarah putting a quote on the board and students discussing its meaning and journaling about their connections to the quote. She’ll often ask students to write how they can use that thought in their daily life.

Wednesdays are “wow facts.” At the beginning of the year, students (who are comfortable) share a surprising fact about themselves, and on Wednesdays, Sarah puts one of these facts on the board. We are all amazed at what we find out about our classmates/students. For “Thankful Thursday,” students write a quick note to someone they’re thankful for and share it with that person. The difference that these notes have made is remarkable.

Kim uses a mix of activities to start class. Some days she asks a question, such as, “What is that one movie you can watch over and over again?” Students then share their answers with the entire class. Students who may not have an answer know it’s OK to say that they don’t know. This is similar to Sarah’s “This or That” strategy. Another idea is to ask students to submit a link to a favorite (school-appropriate) song and start class by playing it. Students can then guess who picked that song. Regardless of what method you use, taking a few minutes at the start of class to develop a habit of connecting with students pays off throughout the year in student behaviors and productivity.

We as teachers know that it’s the little things that go the distance when it comes to connecting with students. Being even-tempered, being predictable, or saying hello or good morning to start the students’ day can make all the difference. When a teacher shows recognition to a student in the hallway, asks how their night (or game, concert, practice, etc.) went, or just listens, it can make all the difference in that child’s day. Students love to see the fun, silly side of teachers. Keeping a focus on connections 180 days of the year can make students feel safe, seen, and ready to engage