YOU'RE NOT ALONE IN THIS WORK

A Reminder That What You Do Still Matters

Conversation 1: Laying the Groundwork

Practical strategies for building the foundation every classroom needs

Complimentary excerpt from Beyond The Lesson: Volume I *by Duke Marshall, M.Ed.*

Some days, you show up and wonder if it's making a difference. You pour yourself out — into lessons, into kids, into people — and it still feels like it's not enough.

But here's what you need to hear: It is. You are.

This work still matters — because the people you show up for still matter.

Don't underestimate the power of a kind word, a quiet presence, or showing up one more time. In a world that is quick to burn out its best people, your consistency is radical.

Thank you for supporting educators and answering the call. This free excerpt is just the beginning of the conversation. We hope it reminds you that you're not alone — and that what you do still matters.

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CONVERSATION 1: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Building Structure, Trust, and Engagement from Day One

A strong start sets the tone for the entire year. This chapter provides strategies for building relationships with students, establishing clear routines, and fostering accountability---all while keeping engagement high.

The start of a new school year brings a unique blend of excitement and nerves for both students and teachers alike. Whether you're stepping into the classroom for the first time or have years of experience under your belt, these early weeks are critical in shaping the months ahead.

As Dr. James Comer wisely noted, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." The foundation you lay during these first crucial weeks creates the conditions where meaningful relationships---and the learning they support---can flourish. What you sow in August and September, you'll harvest all the way through May and June.

Last year, I witnessed this firsthand when a struggling sophomore named Marcus entered my classroom with arms crossed and eyes downcast. By investing extra time during those first two weeks to learn about his interest in digital art and incorporating that into early assignments, I watched his resistance transform into engagement. By December, he was leading class discussions. The groundwork matters.

💬 **Reflection Point:** Think about a student who initially seemed disengaged but later connected with your class. What specific actions helped build that connection?

Teacher Tip: Take five minutes each day during the first week to have a brief one-on-one conversation with a handful of students. By the end of the week, you'll have connected individually with everyone. Ask about their interests outside of school or what they hope to learn this year. These small interactions create the foundation for stronger relationships throughout the year.

"Words cannot express how supportive Mr. Marshall has been in my life; he is a positive figure that encourages me and others to have goals and aspirations and helps us to achieve those dreams... I believe that if everyone was just a little bit like Mr. Marshall, the world would be a much better place."

--- Grant Landry, LCHS Class of 2025 Honor Student

Building Early Connections: A Principal's Approach

Setting the Tone Before Day One

When I served as summer school principal for the first time at my high school in California, I approached staff orientation with a business mindset that prioritized proactive engagement. Rather than treating summer school as merely remedial education, I saw an opportunity to transform students' expectations and experiences from the very beginning.

During our staff orientation, I instructed all summer school teachers to go to their classrooms, take their rosters, and call each one of their students personally. The directive was simple but powerful: tell them how excited you are to welcome them to summer school. This wasn't just about logistics---it was about setting a positive tone for the entire summer session before students even stepped foot on campus.

The results were remarkable. Students arrived on the first day already feeling a connection to their teachers and with a more positive mindset about summer school. Teachers reported fewer behavioral issues and higher engagement levels from the start.

Real Example: When Ms. Rodriguez called her remedial algebra students before summer school began, one parent became emotional on the phone. "In four years of high school, no teacher has ever called just to say they're looking forward to having my son in class," she explained. That student had perfect attendance for the entire summer session---a dramatic improvement from his regular school year record.

Creating a Personal Connection Tradition

This experience taught me a valuable lesson about the power of early outreach that I've carried throughout my career. To this day, it remains a cornerstone of my educational practice. Each school year, I contact all my families before the first day of school, usually via email, to introduce myself and express my enthusiasm for the upcoming year.

For students with additional needs, I take communication a step further. I personally call the parents of students with 504 plans, creating an opportunity to understand their child's specific requirements and assure them of my commitment to their success. These conversations build trust and open channels for ongoing dialogue throughout the year.

Cultural Responsiveness Note

When reaching out to families from diverse backgrounds, consider:

- Offering communications in multiple languages when possible.
- Being mindful of different cultural communication styles.
- Learning correct pronunciation of names before calling.
- Acknowledging cultural celebrations or important community events.

Maintaining Consistent Communication

I've learned that proactive communication shouldn't be limited to the beginning of the year. Each week, I continue to connect with families, sharing updates, highlighting successes, and addressing concerns before they escalate. This consistent outreach serves a dual purpose:

Prevention over intervention: By maintaining open lines of communication, I can address potential issues before they develop into significant problems.

Positive reinforcement: Regular contact allows me to recognize and celebrate positive student behaviors and strengthen the behaviors I want to see in my classroom.

As I often remind my colleagues, "I don't water the weeds." Instead of focusing my energy on problematic behaviors after they occur, I cultivate the growth I want to see through proactive communication and relationship building.

This approach transforms the traditional reactive model of school communication into a proactive strategy that benefits students, families, and educators alike.

✅ **Quick Win:** Create a communication template with customizable sections that you can quickly adapt for weekly parent updates. Include spaces for curriculum highlights, upcoming deadlines, and a personalized note about something positive you observed about their child that week. Having this template ready saves time while ensuring consistent, meaningful outreach.

Creating a Meaningful Meet the Teacher Night

Meet the Teacher Night is often viewed as a formality, but it holds tremendous potential to shape parent-teacher relationships for the entire year. Rather than approaching it as just another task, think of it as a strategic opportunity to connect, establish trust, and generate excitement for the learning journey ahead.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

From the moment families step into your classroom, they should feel welcomed and reassured:

- **Mix up your lighting**---nobody feels comfortable under harsh fluorescents alone. Grab some lamps, string lights, or battery-operated candles to create a warm atmosphere.
- **Play soft background music** to fill awkward silences and consider providing simple refreshments.
- **Arrange seating in small groups** rather than rows to encourage conversation.
- **Display sample assignments** from previous years to highlight what students will achieve, giving families a tangible sense of the learning journey ahead.

Accessibility Consideration: Ensure pathways are clear for wheelchairs and that any handouts are available in large print. Consider having a quiet corner for students who might experience sensory overload.

Teacher Tip: A colleague once transformed her classroom with $15 worth of string lights and a Spotify playlist. Parents commented that it felt like "a place where learning would be enjoyable" rather than stressful.

Engaging with Families Effectively

The first 30 seconds matter tremendously---don't just say "Hi, I'm Miss Jones." Make eye contact, acknowledge everyone (yes, even the little siblings), and find something personal to comment on. This immediate connection sets the tone for an authentic relationship.

When connecting with your new students, try asking thoughtful questions:

- "What makes you most curious at school?"
- "What's one thing you're hoping to accomplish this year?"

Jot these answers down on index cards---they're invaluable for personalizing your approach later.

For parents, instead of talking at them, ask, "What should I know about how your child learns best?" Then listen---really listen. This demonstrates that you value their insight and creates a collaborative relationship from day one.

Try This: Create a simple "Getting to Know You" station where families can fill out a colorful note card with three things: their child's strengths, one area they'd like to see growth in, and something that motivates their student. These insights provide valuable perspective that standardized data doesn't capture, and parents appreciate being asked for their expertise about their own child.

Providing Clear Information

Parents appreciate clarity. Create a simple, well-designed packet including:

- A visual roadmap of the curriculum.
- Your approach to grading and assessment in plain language.
- How technology will be used in the classroom, and how parents can access lessons, grades, and important resources to stay informed and engaged.

Communication Expectations and Realistic Response Times

Take time to explain the importance of due dates and closing dates in your learning management system. Walk them through how to check Canvas or any other platform you use and encourage them to have weekly check-ins with their child about assignments.

✅ **Quick Win:** Create a single-page visual "Course at a Glance" handout showing major units, projects, and skills students will develop throughout the year.

Digital Equity Consideration

🎛️ When discussing technology with families:

- Provide a confidential way for families to communicate technology access challenges.
- Share information about school resources (computer labs, library hours).
- Have printed alternatives for all digital materials.

- Consider creating a classroom tech lending library with simple check-out procedures.

Establishing Structure and Expectations Early

Students thrive with structure. The more consistent and clear your routines are, the more confident and engaged they will be. The first few weeks are crucial for establishing these expectations, as they set the tone for the entire year.

Creating Effective Daily Routines

A predictable schedule helps students focus their mental energy on learning rather than figuring out what comes next. Consider implementing this consistent lesson structure:

Start Strong (8-12 minutes)

- Begin with a warm-up activity that gets bodies moving and brains engaged.
- Clearly state what you're learning today and what success looks like.
- Connect to prior knowledge.

Direct Instruction (20-25 minutes)

- Break content into manageable chunks, using both visual and verbal explanations.
- Show examples before asking students to try independently.
- Incorporate brief check-in moments where students can process information.

Practice Time (25-30 minutes)

- Provide opportunities for independent or group practice.
- Start with easier tasks and gradually increase difficulty.
- Move around the room, offering guidance where needed.

Wrap-Up (5-10 minutes)

- End with a quick review, exit ticket, or discussion to reinforce learning.
- Ask reflective questions like "What was challenging today and why?"
- Preview how today's work sets them up for tomorrow's success.

Posting the daily agenda where students can see it ensures they always know what to expect and helps them develop time-management skills.

Real Example: When I began using this four-part structure consistently, student anxiety visibly decreased. A formerly reluctant participant told me, "I like knowing what's coming next. It helps me get my brain ready."

Co-Creating Classroom Norms

👥 **Student Voice Opportunity:** During your first week, set aside time to collaboratively establish classroom agreements. Ask students:

- What helps you learn best?
- How should we handle mistakes in our classroom?
- What should respectful disagreement look like?

Document these agreements visually and refer to them regularly, giving students ownership in the classroom culture.

Reinforcing Deadlines and Accountability

One of the biggest challenges teachers face is managing assignment deadlines. To establish a culture of responsibility:

- **Clearly distinguish** between "due dates" (when an assignment is expected) and "closing dates" (when it is no longer accepted).
- **Use digital reminders** and visual cues to keep students on track.
- **For larger projects,** break them into manageable checkpoint deliverables. This kind of chunking is a common accommodation in 504 and IEP plans, so using it proactively supports all learners---not just those with documented needs.
- **Help students estimate** how long tasks will take.
- **After deadlines pass,** build in reflection time to help students improve their work management for future assignments.

Try This: For your first major assignment, have students estimate completion time, track their actual time, and reflect on the difference. This simple metacognitive exercise improves planning skills dramatically.

Integrating Technology for Engagement

Technology can be an incredible tool for making lessons more interactive, engaging, and efficient---when used purposefully. Rather than overwhelming students with too many platforms, introduce them gradually and with clear intention.

Strategic Technology Integration

Focus on a few strategic tools rather than presenting fifteen different apps and websites:

Your Home Base:

- Use one learning management system (Canvas, Google Classroom) as your central hub.
- Start with basic features and add complexity weekly.
- Set up parent/guardian access accounts early with clear instructions.

Skill Development:

- Implement resources that strengthen student skill sets in an engaging way.
- Choose tools that provide valuable data on student progress.

Real-World Applications:

- Introduce tools students might use in future careers.
- Begin with guided exploration before assigning independent projects.

Real Example: When introducing career-relevant technology in my biology class, I partnered with a local laboratory that used similar digital tools. Students were more engaged knowing they were learning software used by scientists in the field. Several students mentioned this connection in their end-of-year reflections as a highlight of the course.

Introducing Tech Thoughtfully

To avoid tech fatigue, introduce one tool at a time with intentional scaffolding:

Week One:

- Focus on mastering one platform completely.
- Ensure everyone can log in and navigate successfully.

- Create visual guides for reference.

Week Two:

- Add complementary tools that work with your primary platform.
- Establish workflows between different applications.

Week Three:

- Have students create content using your digital tools.
- Teach basic troubleshooting strategies.

Be mindful of different tech comfort levels among your students. Create printed quick-reference guides and establish tech buddies for peer support.

Smart Solution: Last year, I created a "Tech Trouble Tree" decision flowchart that reduced tech questions by 70%. Students followed the troubleshooting steps before asking for help, building both independence and digital literacy.

Connecting Early Routines to Assessment Success

The systems you establish in the first weeks directly impact assessment outcomes throughout the year. When students understand expectations from day one, they're better positioned to demonstrate their learning effectively.

By establishing clear routines for how assignments are submitted, what quality work looks like (using examples), how feedback will be provided, and how revision opportunities work, you create a foundation where assessments become meaningful learning experiences rather than stress-inducing events.

Try This: Create a simple rubric for an early low-stakes assignment that focuses on process rather than content. Use this to establish expectations for future work while building student confidence.

Differentiated Approaches Based on Experience Level

For New Teachers

- Focus on establishing 3-4 core routines rather than trying to do everything perfectly.
- Seek specific feedback from a trusted colleague on your classroom systems.
- Document what works and what doesn't for future reference.

✅ **Quick Win:** Keep a small notepad handy during your first month of teaching. Jot down what's working well and what needs adjustment immediately after each class period. This real-time documentation helps you make informed adjustments while the observations are fresh, rather than trying to remember everything at the end of the day.

For Mid-Career Teachers

- Identify your "pain points" from previous years and redesign those specific systems.
- Try one significant innovation while maintaining proven practices in other areas.
- Share successful strategies with newer colleagues.

Teacher Tip: One veteran teacher I know keeps a "Future Me" folder where she documents successful strategies throughout the year. When planning for the next school year, she reviews this folder first---saving herself from reinventing what already works well and allowing her to focus innovation where it's most needed.

For Veteran Educators

- Consider having students help create accountability structures.
- Mentor a new teacher by sharing your systems and routines.
- Refresh your approach with one new engagement strategy.

Smart Solution: A 20-year teaching veteran in my district created "student system analysts"---rotating pairs of students who provide weekly feedback on what's working in the classroom and what needs adjustment. This gives students valuable ownership while providing the teacher with ongoing feedback that keeps her practice fresh and responsive to student needs.

🪓 AHA! Moment

The foundation you lay in the first weeks doesn't just impact September---it shapes your entire year. Strong beginnings create the conditions where meaningful relationships, engaged learning, and personal growth can flourish. When students feel known, supported, and appropriately challenged from the beginning, they're more likely to take academic risks, persist through difficulties, and develop a growth mindset.

Remember:

- A welcoming environment creates psychological safety for learning.
- Consistent routines free up mental energy for deeper thinking.
- Strategic technology integration enhances rather than complicates.
- Different career stages require different approaches, but relationships remain central.

It's not about perfect systems---it's about intentional ones. The thoughtful structures you establish now create space for creativity, inquiry, and deep learning as the year progresses.

🧠 Your Turn: Foundation-Building Challenge

This week, choose one area from this chapter to strengthen your foundation:

Environment: What small change could make your classroom more welcoming and conducive to learning?

Routines: Which part of your daily structure could benefit from more consistency or clarity?

Technology: How might you streamline your digital tools to better support learning objectives?

Communication: Where could you add one more touchpoint with families?

Identify one specific action step you'll take in the next 48 hours. Remember, small intentional changes can transform the learning experience for both you and your students.

Try This: Schedule 15 minutes this weekend to visualize walking through your classroom as if you were a student entering for the first time. What do you notice? What feels welcoming? What might cause anxiety? This simple mental exercise often reveals small adjustments that can significantly improve your learning environment.

📑 Key Takeaways

- **Connection precedes content** - Build trust and center students before delivering academic material.
- **Celebrate small wins often and authentically** - Recognition fuels motivation and engagement.
- **Kindness is a classroom management strategy** - Compassionate approaches strengthen classroom culture.
- **Assessment of success begins with clear early expectations** - Set transparent standards from the start.
- **Cultural responsiveness strengthens classroom relationships** - Honor students' backgrounds to deepen connections.

This is Conversation 1 from "Beyond The Lesson: Volume I" by Duke Marshall, M.Ed. For the complete collection of conversations and additional resources, visit www.WeAreAcademicAllies.com