

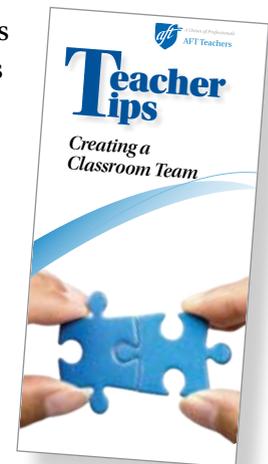
Teacher Tips

Creating a Classroom Team

Each new school year brings high hopes, great expectations and challenges for both new and seasoned teachers. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has developed a series called *Teacher Tips* to help teachers start the year off right and anticipate the year ahead.

Teacher Tips is developed with you, the educator, in mind. The tips in this collection are taken from real classroom experiences and are part of the AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) professional development program.

The AFT is a leader in providing teachers the resources they need to help them succeed. Visit AFT's Web site for teacher resources at www.t-source.org today.



Think for a moment about all the individuals who work on behalf of our students each day. For instance, many students are driven safely to school by a licensed bus driver or are escorted across busy intersections by a crossing guard near the school grounds. Students may start their school day in the cafeteria, where they receive a nutritious breakfast from food service workers so they will be ready to learn.

Throughout the day, students interact with and receive a myriad of services from librarians, school secretaries, custodians, school nurses and security personnel. Everyone inside and outside the building has a role to play in ensuring that students are safe and ready to learn. In many schools, paraprofessionals assist teachers and students in the classroom.

Respect and communication are crucial to establishing an effective classroom team. By speaking with paraprofessionals and teachers, the AFT has gathered several tips about how to make working together work.

Good Communication + Teamwork = Student Success

- ◆ All education professionals must work together for student success.
- ◆ Everyone plays a vital role.
- ◆ Paraprofessionals are essential team members.
- ◆ Respect and communication are crucial.

Create an Open Relationship

Create a healthy, open relationship between you and the paraprofessionals in your classroom. Set aside time to get to know each other. This could include each of you discussing your background, experience, special interests, and even strengths and weaknesses. Together, you should set goals for your class. Understanding the other teachers and parapro-

fessionals you work with will make your work easier and ultimately more successful for your students.

Be an Active Listener

Active listening is the key to true communication. It is a good way to really get to know another person and understand his or her side of a problem or issue. Active listening helps the person you're talking with speak freely and explain his or her views, so you can work out a solution together. The best active listeners employ specific strategies to maximize the effectiveness of every conversation.

Active Listening Strategies:

- ◆ **Encourage**—Being encouraging shows you're interested in what the other person is saying and keeps the other person talking when he or she might be shy or reluctant. It helps to use neutral, nonjudgmental words and to keep your voice free from anger or ridicule.
- ◆ **Clarify**—Clarifying includes asking who, what, why, when and where questions. Clarifying helps you get clear information from the other person and understand his or her point of view, so you can find a solution that works for both of you. Ask questions if you don't understand what the other person is saying or if you need more details.
- ◆ **Restate the facts**—Restating the facts shows you've been listening to the other person. By repeating the basic ideas and facts you've just heard the other person express, you make sure you've understood.
- ◆ **Reflect**—In reflecting, you describe the other person's feelings. Reflecting shows you understand how the other person feels and brings those feelings out into the open.
- ◆ **Summarize**—When summarizing, review the problem or issue you've discussed and how you'll handle it. Summing up pulls together

your entire conversation and sets the stage for further discussions.

- ◆ **Validate**—Validating recognizes the other person’s dignity, efforts and opinions.

Avoid Communication Barriers

Avoid communication barriers—these will only cloud the lines of open communication and risk weakening your relationship.

Barriers to Opening Communication:

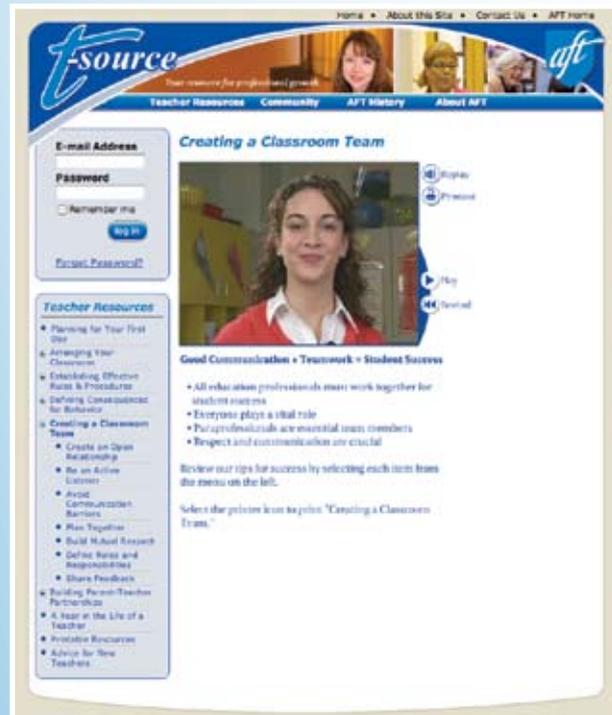
- ◆ **Destructive criticism and name-calling**—Destructive criticism and name-calling are approaches that put the other person on the defensive. They may be so hurt or angry that they can only hear the insult or put-down, not the problem you’re trying to solve.
- ◆ **Diagnosing or mind-reading**—Diagnosing or mind-reading includes second-guessing the other person. Like destructive criticism, mind-reading keeps the other person on the defensive and may keep you from getting what you want from them, which is a solution or approach to your common problem.
- ◆ **Ordering or threatening**—Ordering or threatening is never a good idea. Commanding or controlling language may get you what you want in the short run,

but hurts the paraprofessional-teacher relationship in the long run because it can cause lasting resentment.

Plan Together

Planning together keeps you productive and motivated. While the teacher may be the person to initiate a plan, the paraprofessional should feel free to give input and suggestions. Planning weekly schedules and daily activities can make both your lives easier. You may want to use a daily “things to do” list that assigns a priority to each task. You also could work together to create bulletin board displays, instructional games and special activities.

For more information on how to work with paraprofessionals, visit www.t-source.org and select “Creating a Classroom Team.”



Build Mutual Respect

Assertiveness and mutual respect cement the bond of a classroom team. Assertive behavior means expressing yourself clearly (but without resentment or rage), asking questions when you need to and addressing problems in a nonconfrontational way as soon as they arise. When asked what “respect between co-workers” means, teachers and paraprofessionals mention these behaviors. Of course, they acknowledge that no two co-workers can live up to this “dream list” every day—it’s just something to strive for.

Define Roles and Responsibilities

Defining roles and responsibilities can prevent confusion and conflict. Often, the paraprofessional starts a job with only a vague idea of the teacher’s needs or the tasks he or she is expected to perform. The first weeks in the classroom together can be confusing, especially since teachers can vary in the kind of help and the specific job duties they expect from a paraprofessional. While it’s the teacher’s job to communicate this information clearly, both colleagues can move the process along by asking questions, speaking in a direct and honest way, and bringing up problems before they become crises.

A paraprofessional has the right to ask questions such as:

- ◆ “What are my regular duties?”
- ◆ “What is the daily routine?”
- ◆ “What student records are available to me?”

- ◆ “How much contact should I have with parents?”
- ◆ “What’s expected of me in terms of student discipline?”

In turn, the teacher has the right to expect the paraprofessional to be reliable, flexible and cooperative.

Share Feedback

Feedback builds a working team. While the teacher takes the lead in the classroom, both teacher and paraprofessional should have the chance to share feedback. Feedback cuts down on confusion, duplicating tasks and resentment between paraprofessional and teacher. You may find a “tune-up” checklist like the one shown on the next page to be helpful.



Sample Tune-Up Checklist:

- ◆ Are we meeting frequently enough?
- ◆ Are we sharing information about student performance, behavior and growth?
- ◆ Do we need to work further on defining job roles, setting goals and evaluating students?
- ◆ What areas would we like to see improved?
- ◆ What areas can we congratulate ourselves on?
- ◆ Are we treating each other as co-workers rather than supervisor and subordinate?
- ◆ Do we each feel free to offer suggestions or bring up problems?
- ◆ Are we both fulfilling our job descriptions so that neither of us is overburdened or under-utilized?

Five Great Reasons to Join a Union of Professionals

The American Federation of Teachers:

1 Supports you in the classroom. Effective learning only takes place when high-quality teachers, with the support of other competent professionals, have the materials and assistance needed to accomplish the task. Your union is a strong advocate for quality classroom materials that are aligned to the standards of achievement we expect our students to meet. We also insist that state and district assessments for measuring student progress are aligned with these standards and that the assessments be used appropriately to support student learning.

2 Helps you prepare. No matter how well prepared you may have been before entering the classroom, there is always room for improvement. Ongoing professional development that meets you at your point of need is vital for continued growth as an educator. The AFT and its affiliates deliver some of the finest professional development programs available; and in situations where ours are not available, we advocate and broker for you to receive the best training possible.

3 Stands up for you. Whether the discussion is taking place in the White House, in the halls of Congress, on the floor of your statehouse, in colleges of education or in your local editorial pages, you can be sure that union representatives are

weighing in assertively, ensuring that the collective voice of educators comes through clearly and effectively.

4 Advocates for your profession. No one enters the teaching profession without a strong desire to help children reach their potential. Yet, at times the realities of life make this calling difficult to stick with. Adequate salaries and benefits are essential in order to keep the best teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff in our public schools. Working conditions such as manageable class sizes, adequate teaching materials, and discipline policies that support teaching and enhance student learning are important factors in ensuring that the best teachers remain in the classroom.

5 Keeps you informed. *American Educator* is one of the most highly respected journals available to keep you informed on current thinking in public education by some of the most capable thinkers and doers in the field. *American Teacher* will keep you on top of the challenges and successes of your colleagues across the country. And a host of optional publications, as well as a comprehensive Web site that will assist you in addressing the particular needs of your school and classroom, provide the balance of a professional literature package that is second to none.