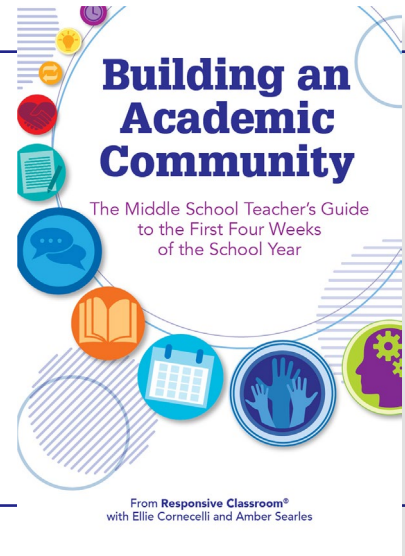


# Building an Academic Community: The Middle School Teacher's Guide to the First Four Weeks of the School Year

From *Responsive Classroom*  
with Ellie Cornecelli and Amber Searles



## Introduction

*"By helping students understand and follow rules and routines, form positive relationships with one another and with you, and actively engage with learning, you're giving them the tools they need to stay motivated and achieve success." (12)*

The beginning of a new school year is a crucial time to create a safe and engaging classroom and school. In addition to the beginning of a school year, what are other times a "fresh start" can be helpful?

These eight important concepts and practices are described in the Introduction and will be discussed throughout the book:

- Teacher language
- Open ended questions
- Interactive Modeling
- Responsive Advisory Meetings
- Interactive learning structures
- Brain breaks
- Active teaching
- Teaching discipline

Which practices are you familiar with? Have you used any of them in your classroom? Which ones are you interested in focusing on this year?

## Preparing for the School Year

*"A successful start to the school year begins with preparation." (13)*

How do you incorporate knowledge about where students are developmentally into your teaching practice?

If you already work as a part of a team, what are the positive aspects of doing so that are not mentioned in this chapter? How would you go about creating your own team if you have not been assigned one?

Why is teacher self-care such an important consideration? What are some strategies you use to maintain your physical and emotional health during the school year?

## **The First Day of School**

*“Students want to be successful in school. It’s important for teachers to hold this as a universal truth, and the first day of school is a prime opportunity to communicate this belief to all the students you teach.” (25)*

Starting on the first day, building community is one of the foundational conditions for success. Aside from a Responsive Advisory Meeting, what other actions or activities can help build community right from the start? Why is it important to introduce rules and promptly redirect misbehavior from the very beginning of school?

## **The Rest of Week One**

*“While it may feel challenging to think about fitting community- and relationship-building into a busy academic schedule, remember that social-emotional and academic success support each other.” (43)*

Low-risk Responsive Advisory Meetings during the first week of school allow students to become comfortable with this routine while building connections with others. What are some guidelines to keep in mind for each component of Responsive Advisory Meeting to keep meetings low-risk?

How could you use a thoughtful closing to the school day to get to know your students better?

Towards the end of Week One, it’s time to begin setting SMART goals. How could [this SMART goal](#) planner help your students set academic or behavioral goals?

## **Week Two**

*“Establishing clear expectations is a proactive strategy for setting students— and yourself—up for success, as you can refer to these expectations when the inevitable challenges, snags, and hurdles come up during the school year.” (61)*

Anchor charts can help students build independence with new procedures and routines. What other strategies can help students build confidence in their academic work? What do you notice about the other tools offered in this section?

How can reinforcing language, which affirms students' positive actions, be used to build community? How can logical consequences—respectful, related and realistic responses to misbehaviors—also be used for community building?

### **Week Three**

*“Even if students were in class together the year before, there is more for them to learn about each other due to the rapid changes of young adolescence, including new interests, identity formation, cognitive development, and ethical reasoning.” (83)*

Two of the goals for this week are building a positive classroom community and providing appropriate academic challenge. How can practices like Responsive Advisory Meeting and interactive learning structures help you work towards these goals?

Active teaching is a developmentally appropriate strategy for delivering instruction to middle school students. It has three phases: teach and model, student collaboration, and reflection. Review the list of reflection questions on pages 96 and 97. What are some ways you can incorporate reflection into your active teaching lessons?

In order to serve children well, particularly those who are dealing with toxic stress, it is essential that we teachers take good care of ourselves. This is especially important if we have experienced any trauma in our own lives. What other strategies would you add to the list on page 110? What advice on self-care would you give to a colleague?

### **Week Four**

*“As the year progresses, it’s helpful to keep in mind that the mood of the classroom is deeply influenced by your demeanor. Staying firm, kind, and upbeat can set a positive mood that helps minimize misbehavior.” (125)*

Congratulations on three busy and energizing weeks! Now that it's Week Four, take some time to reflect on the progress you and your students have made. What has gone well so far? How can you sustain these successes?

Use the progress chart on page 114 to reflect on the climate of your classroom during the first weeks of the school year. What progress has already been made? What goals do you have for the next four weeks?