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ORGANIZING THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

“Sharing responsibilities in the classroom community helps teachers and students work cooperatively and collaboratively to ensure success.”

Vicki Gibson and Jan Hasbrouck, 2008

There are many ways to organize classroom environments to ensure safe participation and efficient use. Teachers can create work areas that support intentional teaching and meaningful guided practice in small groups with options for station choices. Begin by determining available resources such as the amount of floor space and furniture in the room, access to health facilities, and needs for technology and storage areas. While evaluating resources, consider how many students will attend and participate in classroom activities. Stand in the doorway of the classroom and scan the environment while thinking about possibilities. Consider placement options for furniture and access around the room. Plan adjustments in the physical environment that may be necessary for students with special needs.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Designating Classroom Work Areas
- Regulating Attendance in Learning Stations
- Selecting Activity Choices for Learning Stations
- Organizing Materials for Use and Storage



Ensure that entry areas and walkways remain uncluttered for safe access.

As you consider the use of space and placement of furniture, think about safety factors and ensure that there will be:

- Clear visibility for monitoring students at all times,
- Safe access to all entry areas and walkways,
- Easy access to facilities for personal hygiene and handwashing,
- Sufficient space for any physical activity—either whole-group or small-group, and
- Storage space for instructional materials, either in active use or to be used later.

Organizing the environment and assigning areas in the classroom should occur before furniture is physically arranged. Make decisions that ensure that the classroom environment will be structured to support teaching and practice.

Consider the following choices when making decisions about the physical classroom arrangement:

- Where will you create work areas for whole-group and small-group activities?
- How will you organize materials and supplies?
- Which wall areas or bulletin boards can be used to communicate expectations for students, other school personnel and support staff, and family members?

After you decide how the physical classroom space will be used, you will select management tools, routines, and procedures that will promote compatibility and self-regulation, encouraging students to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Numerous suggestions for using management tools are included in this *Implementation Guide*. These tools are inexpensive and easy to construct. Most of the tools serve as visual road maps and reminders for students to help them recall what to do, how to participate, and when to perform.

Before discussing ways to teach and model efficient routines and procedures using these management tools, however, it might be helpful to provide more detailed information about specific areas that will help you prepare the environment to support teaching, guided practice, and collaborative practice using whole-group and small-group activities at the teaching table, worktable, and learning stations.

Designating Classroom Work Areas

There are many factors that affect decisions about using classroom space. Some areas will be used for whole-group activities such as unit overviews, book reading, shared writing experiences, collaborative discussions, or creative movement (Kindergarten). Other areas in your classroom will be used for explicit small-group instruction or collaborative practice in learning stations.

Determine which work areas will require more space, such as a Meeting Place for whole-group activities. Older elementary students will likely sit at their desks for whole-group activities. Depending on the movability of desks and amount of available space, teachers might choose to cluster desks in various formations to designate areas of the classroom for whole-group or small-group activities.

Here are some considerations to think about when assigning work areas:

- Large activity areas require more space—especially those that involve physical movement (Kindergarten). These areas should be located away from any furniture with sharp corners or that could tip over if bumped.
- Small-group work areas often include furniture, such as a table and chairs or clustered desks, and shelving for supplies or materials.
- Work areas that involve technology may require safe access to electrical outlets.
- Small-group areas that involve games, art or discovery materials, or that employ manipulatives, need to be placed away from the teaching table and worktable because they invite more conversation that elevates the noise level and may cause distractions.

In addition to whole-group activities, you will select areas for learning stations that support interactive, collaborative practice for small groups of 2–6 students. Some learning stations will remain in your classroom all year, such as a Mathematics and Science Discovery Station, a Literacy Station, or a Creative Arts Station. Other learning stations will change to align with various units or curricular themes.

GRADE-LEVEL MODIFICATIONS

The basic rotation system described in this *Implementation Guide* utilizes three types of small-group activities, here referred to as *teaching table*, *worktable*, and *learning stations*. For young children, these designations work well. Teachers of older elementary students (Grades 2–5) may choose to use different terminology, especially for learning stations. Other names for learning stations may include *stations*, *workstations*, *learning stations*, or simply *collaborative practice*.

Typically, you will need space for these work areas in your classroom daily and all year:

Whole-Group Meeting Place (or individual desks). This area will be used for whole-group activities. Students will report to this area during opening or closing activities and during transitions. In this area, students will sit closely in a group or at individual desks that are clustered or positioned in rows. During whole-group activities, students will listen to stories, participate in collaborative conversations, and complete shared writing exercises. Kindergarten and early elementary students may also participate in interactive fine arts and physical activities. Ensure that the *Meeting Place* provides sufficient room for students to move and participate safely. You might also have students return to this area (or individual desks) during transitions between activities to read books, complete activities in their Do/Done Folders, or talk quietly with peers.

Teaching Table. A teaching table is an area where you will work with small groups of students and provide explicit instruction differentiated to their capabilities and needs. Usually this space includes a table, 4–6 chairs, and shelving to store materials. You can also have students cluster desks if a table is not available. For clarity, this *Implementation Guide* will call this area the *teaching table* whether a table/ chair combination or clustered desks are used to create the space. At the teaching table, students will receive high-quality instruction and feedback using new and challenging content and skills. Students will be encouraged to make comments, ask questions, and seek help. More information about the teaching table is included on pages 15–16.

Worktable. A worktable is an area reserved for small-group guided practice using previously taught content and skills. If available, a teaching assistant, a special education provider, or an EL specialist can work with a small group of students and provide extended guided practice. If no other adult is available, students will meet at the worktable and work together cooperatively. Usually the worktable area includes a table and 4–6 chairs so that students can be seated while participating in skill-reinforcing games, fine art projects, or other guided-practice activities, working collaboratively with their peers with or without direct adult supervision.

As with the teaching table, clustered desks can be used to create a worktable area so that students face each other and work in a close circle to facilitate quiet conversation and minimize distractions. In this *Implementation Guide*, *worktable* will refer to the area used for guided practice, whether utilizing a table/chair combination or clustered desks. If using clustered desks, teachers should remember to designate the same area of the room for the same type of activity each day. Students will learn routines more effectively when there are consistent expectations and placements for each type of activity. More information about using a worktable is provided on pages 15–16.

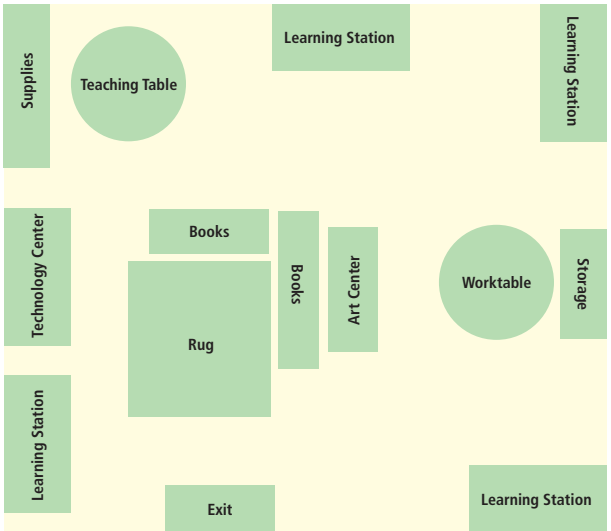
Learning Stations. The number of choice options for *learning stations* will depend on your available space, materials, and preferences. Learning stations are often thematic and skills-based, aimed at providing experiences that are interactive and interesting. Learning station activities should provide multiple opportunities for students to apply previously taught concepts or skills while developing social and emotional self-regulation through collaboration with their peers. More information about learning stations is included on pages 17–20.

Assigning Space for a Teaching Table and Worktable

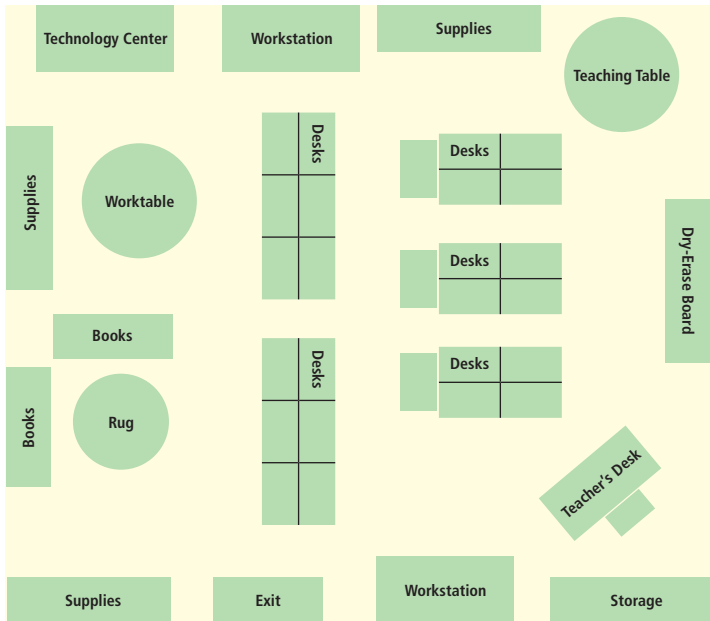
The term *teaching table* identifies a work area in your classroom where you will provide explicit instruction and feedback to a small group of students. This area may include a table with 4–6 chairs, and shelving or containers for storing supplies. If a table is not available, desks can be pushed together to form a table or small circle. When determining placement of the teaching table, some considerations about purpose and use are needed. Primarily, ensure that the teaching table is located in an area where there is less distraction from learning stations. Also, if electrical connections are needed for technology, ensure that there is safe access.

While working with a small group of students at the teaching table, students have more opportunities to interact, express ideas, ask questions for clarification, and engage in collaborative conversations that enhance their understandings. Additionally, there are more opportunities for you to observe students’ responses to instruction closely and to differentiate the lesson content and pacing so that teaching is meaningful and students receive immediate feedback at the point of need.

The term *worktable* designates an area that will be used for extending practice using previously introduced content and skills. If a teaching assistant is available, then the activities at the worktable can be used as guided practice to extend and reinforce learning. When no assistant is available, students work collaboratively in a small group to complete activities that were previously introduced and require less direct adult supervision.



sample diagram for K–Grade 1 classrooms



sample diagram for Grades 1–5 classrooms

DISCUSSION POINTS 1

1. What in the text helps you realize that organizing the environment is necessary to provide high-quality, differentiated instruction?
2. According to Dr. Gibson, how can careful classroom organization prevent many common behavior-management concerns?
3. What organizational changes would be necessary in your classroom to implement a teaching table, worktable, and learning stations? What furniture, technology, or supplies do you currently possess that would be useful? What additional furniture, technology, or supplies would you need?
4. How is the management system described in this *Implementation Guide* similar to or different from your previous practices using whole-group and small-group instruction?

How you use the teaching table and worktable will vary according to the number of adults in the classroom and the amount of instructional time available each day. Having a full-day schedule allows teachers to work with small groups at the teaching table both morning and afternoon. More information about options for use can be found in the section devoted to creating a Daily Schedule, beginning on page 42.

Teachers in half-day (Kindergarten) and full-day (elementary) programs often comment about the challenges of getting everything done. Using tools and routines, as well as designated work areas, will help you manage simultaneously occurring activities at the teaching table, at the worktable, and in learning stations so that you use instructional time efficiently. Conducting simultaneous activities increases daily opportunities for students to receive high-quality, differentiated instruction and feedback, as well as collaborative practice in learning stations where students apply what they have learned using previously taught skills.



Effective classroom management routines help teachers ensure that all students receive high-quality instruction and practice opportunities.

Designating Areas for Learning Stations

Learning stations are collaborative practice areas where students participate in engaging, interactive activities aligned with previously introduced themes, concepts, and skills. Students share learning experiences and engage in collaborative conversations as they create, discover, and make connections by integrating old and new information. Younger students engage in productive play that strengthens their social and emotional development while enhancing academic learning. Older students may engage in problem-solving or discovery activities that encourage critical thinking and application of previously learned content and skills.

Consider the type of learning stations and materials that will be included in your classroom. Determine how many learning stations will be included and ways that you will teach students how to participate. All materials and activities should be introduced in whole group and then practiced at the teaching table and worktable to clarify understanding.

Having students use materials and participate in activities with adult supervision prior to engaging in learning station activities is helpful in many ways. First, students will know how to perform without additional direction, which will prevent interruptions while you are teaching another small group. Second, prior supervised introduction enables students to experience success in learning stations and gain confidence in their competence when they can self-regulate and perform without an adult.

Some materials, games, or activities will require multiple practice opportunities before they are used in learning stations. For example, teaching students how to use math manipulatives, science materials, or certain creative arts materials should include discussions about safety, and also demonstrations of use and cleanup, prior to inclusion in learning stations.

Providing prior instruction and guided practice using materials and participating in activities prepares students to:

- Successfully create and expand imaginations safely,
- Explore, discover, and extend their learning,
- Enhance their comprehension and apply skills successfully, and
- Participate in self-directed, productive practice that is monitored but not directly supervised by adults.



Students exercise choice when selecting learning stations for collaborative practice.

Regulating Attendance in Learning Stations

As students develop cooperative skills and form trusting relationships, they learn to share and use materials safely and collaboratively. Many students will regulate their own behavior more successfully when they attend learning stations that include fewer students and choice options, along with more familiar materials and activities.

Each small-group activity period includes simultaneously occurring activities at the teaching table, worktable, and learning stations. With guidance, students will learn to consider choice options and select a learning station choice. Providing choices also requires limiting how many students can participate in a learning station at one time. Setting standards for attendance in each learning station will proactively help with students’ decision-making and self-regulation.

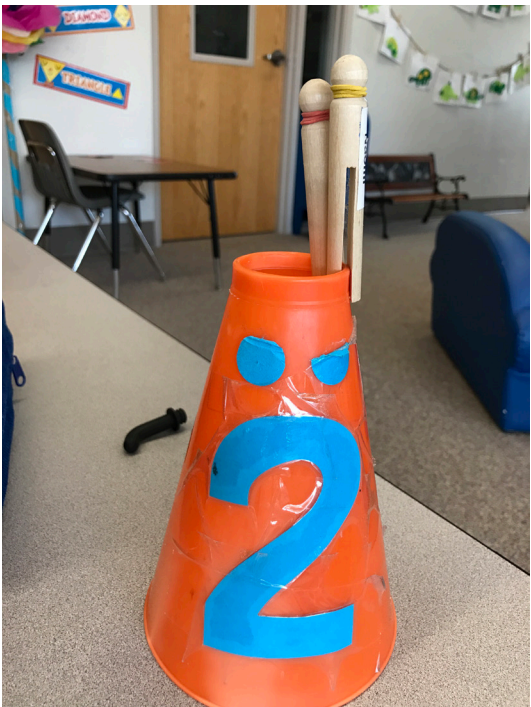
Regulating attendance at each learning station ensures safety and facilitates cleanup during transitions. Most learning stations include activity options and materials that will accommodate 2–4 students, depending on the available space and the type of activity choices included in the learning station. Some learning stations may limit attendance to 1–2 participants—due to availability of equipment or materials, or to encourage behavioral compatibility if students are working in a small space.

When the maximum number of students has been reached at a station, no other students can choose to go there during that activity period. Students who are choosing learning stations understand and accept that a boundary has been reached and no more persons may attend. They must select another learning station. Students know they will have many opportunities to attend learning stations each day, so there are no behavioral issues when first choices are not available. Learning to have an alternative plan and accept when something does not go as wished is a beneficial life skill for students to learn in school.

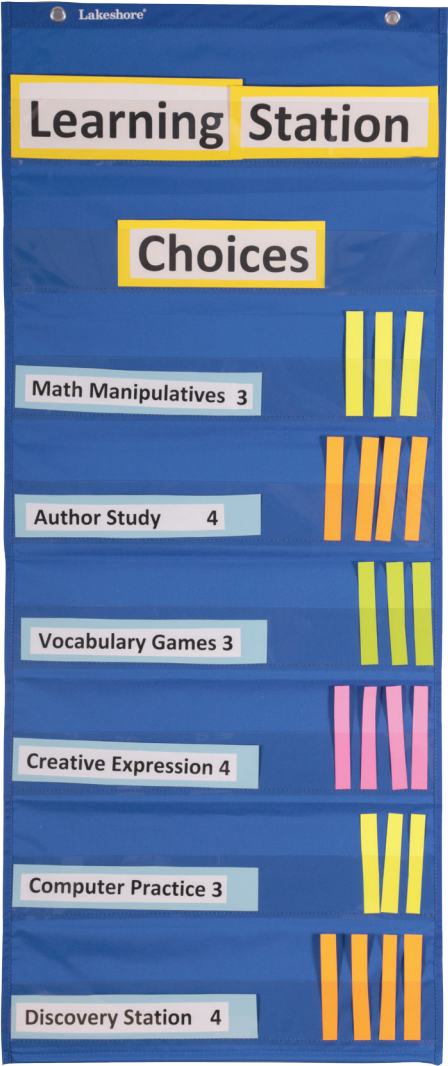
Also, when considering learning stations, plan for days when students, like adults, do not prefer or choose to be socially cooperative. In fact, some students prefer to work alone at the beginning of school because they feel safer and activities appear less overwhelming. Therefore, it is wise to include some learning station choices where attendance is limited to 1–2 students.

Establishing a method for communicating expectations about how many students may attend each learning station at the same time is easy and affordable. You can create and use a sign or an athletic cone with a numeral printed or taped on it to regulate attendance in learning stations. Simply create a sign or use a cone and affix a numeral to indicate how many students may attend the learning station at one time. To avoid confusion, each learning station should have its own sign or cone.

Provide visual support for students who do not recognize words or numerals to illustrate how many students may attend the learning station. Combining the numeral with the shapes helps students understand expectations and supports print awareness and vocabulary development for English Learners.



Post a cone or sign near the entry of the learning station when the learning station is available for use. Remove the sign or cone when the learning station is closed and is not an option.



To regulate attendance at learning stations, teachers may use colored sticks or strips of card stock to indicate how many students may participate at one time. When all sticks or strips for a particular station are taken, remaining students must choose a different activity to attend.

REUSABLE LEARNING STATION IDEAS

- Count the Cost** – Students calculate a cost related to a story or historical event by looking at documents supplied by the teacher or by researching online and completing a simple graphic organizer. Younger students work in pairs to count manipulatives or fake money.
- Creative Expression** – Students use a variety of artistic materials to represent a character or theme from something the class or their small group is currently studying.
- Current Events** – Students choose from a set of short articles, passages, or online videos and then complete a Venn diagram comparing the current event to a story, historical event, idea, or character they are studying. Students then share their diagrams in small group and discuss.
- Great Minds** – Students explore picture books, short articles, or online resources related to a key author or historical figure and complete a graphic organizer and illustration.
- Map Quest** – Students practice reading maps and pamphlets to plan a journey related to a story or historical event. Then they complete an illustration or short project (one-page newspaper article or advertisement).
- Peer Partner Reading** – Students read and discuss assigned stories, articles, or passages (or choose from a selected list) with peer partners and complete guided activities afterward. Younger students review previously read stories or books and identify story parts or main ideas.
- Pen Pals** – Students write and/or illustrate a letter or card to a pen pal, relative, elderly person (whomever the teacher has prearranged) telling or showing what they are learning in school.
- Study Island** – Students use technology to complete activities or practice skills.
- Technology Station** – Students listen to audiobooks or selected recordings, or use computers to complete written responses or a related creative response.
- Vocabulary Practice** – Students complete collaborative activities for vocabulary integration and practice (e.g., word sorts, Frayer model, word wall, etc.).
- Writing Center** – Students brainstorm, complete graphic organizers, and/or write collaboratively in response to writing prompts. Younger students can illustrate stories previously dictated or completed in small group at the teaching table.

Selecting Activity Choices for Learning Stations

Now that you have planned how to use space in your classroom and assigned areas for the teaching table, worktable, and learning stations, the next step is to select activity choices that will reinforce instruction and provide opportunities for collaborative practice. Most teachers create 4–6 learning stations that include choice options for about 10–12 students. Since two small groups of students will be working in assigned areas, the teaching table and worktable, you need choice options for learning stations that accommodate about half of the students in your class.

Activities included in learning stations that will remain in your classroom all year can be coordinated with themes, content, or skills-specific activities. In the beginning, offer fewer choices and materials to facilitate use and efficient cleanup during transitions. You can add more materials and choices later in the school year to maintain students’ interests, but keep things simple in the beginning.

Selecting materials and activities for learning stations usually occurs after you have created lesson plans and set your instructional goals for 1–2 weeks. When selecting materials and activities, consider students’ prior learning, interests, experiences, and current capabilities. It is vital to ensure that the foundational or prerequisite skills have been taught and developed before asking students to perform in learning stations where there is less immediate adult involvement.

Many teachers change materials or activity choices in learning stations every two weeks. The content, materials, and activity choices are usually selected to coordinate with changes in instruction and needs for practice. However, there is no set time for changing or rearranging learning stations in your classroom. When students are no longer choosing to participate in a particular learning station, it is time to make changes. For specific suggestions regarding thematic and yearlong learning stations, see Appendix 2 on pages 93–94.

Organizing Materials for Use and Storage

Organizing and storing materials safely and out of reach prevents problems. Students will explore interesting-looking things. Students need instruction that clearly identifies how and when to use materials in order to prevent problems later. When considering storage options, decide which materials will be used most often and where to store them in the classroom. It is helpful to have materials stored at the point of use, especially for the teaching table, worktable, and Creative Arts Station. Placing materials in or near work areas increases efficiency and facilitates cleanup during transitions.

Materials not in use should be placed out of reach, and preferably out of sight. They can be stored in plastic containers or boxes with lids and stacked to conserve space. Position the stacked containers or boxes in a corner and cover with a tablecloth or sheet. Having the materials out of sight reduces students’ interest in exploring what is in the containers and makes the materials appear new when you do use them.



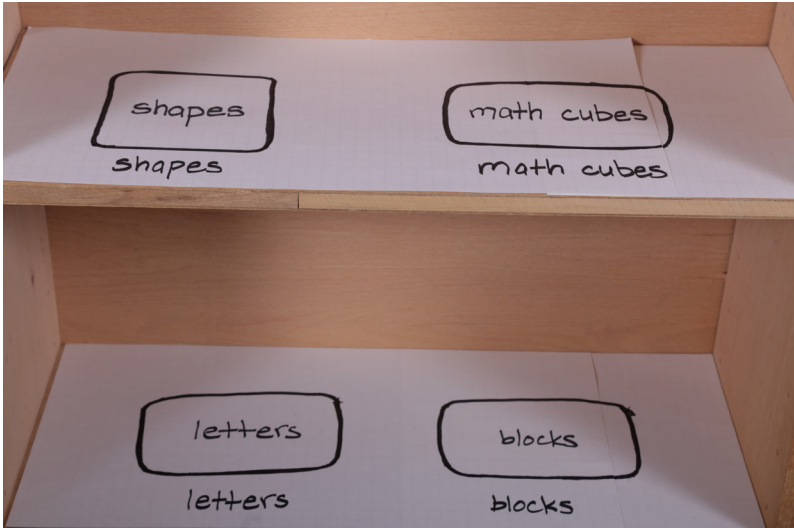
Store learning station materials in individual plastic bins. Include a label that identifies the name or theme of the learning station and a list of contents.



Posting pictures of cleaned up work areas helps clarify expectations so that students learn routines and procedures more quickly.

Select shelving and small containers that you can use to display supplies currently needed. Line the shelves with butcher paper and secure with masking tape. For younger students, use a permanent marker to trace the outline of each container on the butcher paper indicating where students should replace containers when not in use or at the end of an activity. For older students, label the spot where each container should be replaced.

Take pictures of each work area so that students can see where things should be placed or stored. Use the photographs to discuss which objects may or may not be used, how supplies and materials should be used and stored, and how to follow routines for efficient cleanup during transitions. Post the photographs near each work area, or display all of them on a pocket chart. Students can look at the photographs and easily understand how work areas should look after cleanup. Expect that even some students in older elementary grades will need help understanding what constitutes “clean.” Pictures help clarify expectations and enable holding students accountable for their performance.



Younger students learn cleanup routines more efficiently when storage procedures are clearly defined.

Once your classroom environment is organized and materials are stored safely, begin to develop simple routines that you can use to teach students so they know how to participate successfully. Take nothing for granted and over-teach expectations for performance. Demonstrate frequently how to perform and consistently repeat your model. Have students mimic your model as you verbally explain the expectations again and again until students demonstrate understanding and compliance.

Remember to adjust your instruction when the directives you are teaching include new information. Speak slightly slower and use fewer words. Avoid over-talking or repeating directions differently the second and third time. Consistently use the same words and word order in your directions so that students process the information with understanding.

Provide short, simple directions and fewer choices and options initially. Reducing the amount of things to think about helps students during early learning phases. It also helps you! There is less to explain and monitor and less for students to remember when you use fewer words and shorter sentences. You will add more materials and choice options, especially in learning stations, after students understand routines and follow procedures.

Your success and your students’ will correlate directly with the amount of time spent during the first weeks of school for role-play. Provide frequent opportunities for students to practice and receive coaching and feedback—so they develop successful habits for school performance and require less support or prompting from adults. Model and verbalize your thinking frequently about ways to communicate respectfully, cooperate with peers, share and use materials, and act responsibly during all activities. Students learn by observing others—especially teachers. Often your behavior teaches more than your words!

DISCUSSION POINTS 2

1. What are the key factors to remember when designating areas for learning stations and storing materials?
2. How does a teacher determine how many learning stations are needed at one time?
3. What learning stations would be useful in your classroom? How can you collect materials for those stations in ways that are inexpensive and efficient? What would be the best way for you to organize and store station materials?
4. What aspects of your current curriculum could be “redefined” as learning station activities?