

Classroom Setup



Setting up the physical classroom with the typical characteristics of fourth graders in mind can profoundly impact your students' ability to learn. Often anxious, these children need a good measure of security in their classroom starting from the first day of school.

- Knowing where to sit, park homework, and get supplies reduces worry and lets fourth graders concentrate on their learning.
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- In my fifteen years of teaching, I've tried many classroom designs and observed many colleagues' classrooms, learning essentials about setting up a classroom for fourth graders. In this chapter, you'll find guidelines on choosing and arranging furniture, gathering and storing materials, and creating classroom displays. You'll also find tips on using technology with fourth graders. Besides allowing you to set up a classroom that gives fourth graders the support and security they need to do their best work, these guidelines will also help ensure that the learning in your classroom is active, interactive, and child-centered—important in any grade.

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Arranging the Furniture

Early in my teaching career, I'd spend hours and hours every August arranging and rearranging the classroom furniture. Should I put desks in clusters? Where should the meeting area go? Should the bookshelves line the walls or come out from them? I lost count of the number of hours I spent tweaking the classroom layout. Gradually, through experimentation and seeing what worked in other teachers' rooms, I settled on the following methods of furniture setup that have served fourth graders' learning needs well year after year.



Whole-Group Circle

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A whole-group circle is the most important area in any elementary classroom, and fourth grade is no different. This is the first area I set up every year. The circle is perfect for the three-part lesson structure that works so well for fourth graders: brief whole-group instruction in one or two specific skills (done in the circle); a longer stretch of active and interactive learning (done at students' desks or tables); and finally a whole-group closing in which children share reflections on their work as a class or with partners (done in the circle).

Learn more about Morning Meeting

The Morning Meeting Book by Roxann Kriete (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2002).

"Morning Meeting: A Powerful Way to Begin the Day," *Responsive Classroom Newsletter*, in the newsletter article library WWW.RESPONSIVECLASSROOM.ORG.

The circle is also a great place for the class to meet briefly each morning to greet one another and warm up for the day ahead. Gathering in a circle, where everyone can see and be seen by everyone else, sets the tone for a friendly and focused day of learning. In my classroom, I start every day with a *Responsive Classroom*® Morning Meeting just for this purpose (see the resources in the box at left). Whether or not you hold a formal morning meeting, having a circle area allows you to gather the children for similar activities to build community and launch the day.

If your classroom is short on space, try to get a little extra room for a circle by trying new arrangements for the students' desks or tables. (See "I Don't Have Room for a Circle!" on page 14 for more ideas.)

Points to keep in mind:

- **Allow enough space.** You need an area big enough for a circle that lets a whole class of fourth graders see everyone else. Remember that fourth grade bodies can be big, and they're growing rapidly. Your circle (even with younger children) will often become more like an oval or rectangle, so keep an eye out and adjust the space as needed.
- **Use chairs if possible.** Chairs give each student a defined space, which helps with self-control. Chairs are also more comfortable for many students this age, and that comfort helps them focus. If your classroom is small, have children sit on the floor to save space.
- **Assign seats in the circle at the beginning of the year.** You could write students' names on a piece of masking tape attached to each chair or post a seating chart showing students' spots in the circle. Knowing where they should be will help students feel a bit safer. As the year progresses, you can work with students to develop a list of fair and inclusive strategies for choosing a place in the circle.



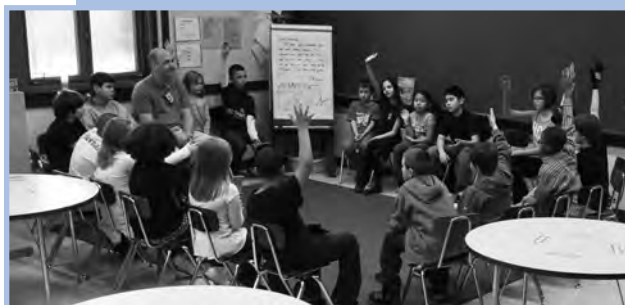
“I Don’t Have Room for a Circle!”

Unfortunately, this is not an unusual dilemma for teachers. Here are some possible solutions:

1 Create a temporary meeting area.

At meeting time, the children move desks and other furniture to open up a large space for a circle. After the meeting, the students return the furniture to its original place. With adequate teaching and practice, children will be able to do this setup and takedown in just a few minutes.

Three keys to making a temporary meeting area work:



- **Choose carefully.** Choose a spot with as little furniture as possible. Any furniture should be easy for students to move.
- **Use props to define the area.** An easel pad typically works well. Ideally, the easel pad would stay put and serve as the point from which the meeting circle grows.

- **Teach furniture moving.** Use interactive modeling to teach and practice how to move the furniture carefully, cooperatively, and quickly. Try turning the practice into a game, such as beating the clock.

2 Create it once, use it twice.

Have children move furniture to make room for a circle at the end of the day and gather the class for a “closing circle,” in which the children reflect on their day, share about their work, or plan together for the following day. After the meeting, leave the space open—don’t move any furniture back. The next morning, the space will be ready for a meeting that wel-

Interactive Modeling

See Chapter 2, “Schedules and Routines,” for a full explanation of interactive modeling.

comes the children, affirms the strength of the community, and warms them up for the day ahead. Once the morning meeting is completed, the children move the furniture back. At the end of the day, they repeat the process.



3 Use a space outside the classroom.

Go to the cafeteria, library, gym, or other space in the school that's large enough to accommodate a circle. This solution, admittedly the most challenging, works best when you:

- **Use the same space every day.** The familiarity will help children succeed.
- **Limit distractions.** For example, if you use the cafeteria, meet when no other class is there.
- **Meet at the same time every day.** Even if it's not the most ideal time, the predictability will help students focus and feel secure.
- **Teach the behaviors.** Be sure to teach transition routines and behavioral expectations outside the classroom.

The whole-group meeting circle is the heart of classroom life. Sitting in a circle, everyone can see and be seen by everyone else. And because the circle has no beginning and no end, it allows everyone an equal place in the group. By the very nature of its design, the meeting circle invites group participation and fosters inclusion. Its presence and prominence in the classroom or in the school day, even if only temporary, say "In this classroom, we value working together, and we value each individual's contributions to the group."

Desk and Table Seating

When you use the circle area as your main space for direct teaching, students can use their desks or tables primarily as work spaces. Arrange the desks or tables and seat students in ways that enable fourth graders to work most productively:



- **Spread out.** Spread tables out around the room. If you use desks, cluster them in twos and threes. Having space around them and proximity to just a few classmates helps fourth graders relax and concentrate. You can put clusters against the walls (try attaching desktops to the walls on hinges if you're pressed for space; fold the desktops flat against the wall when they're not in use). You can even work a cluster into the classroom library area.

Fun Ways to Assign Seats

- **Card sort.** Write students' names on cards. Every other week, place the cards randomly into groups and have students move to their spots for the following two weeks.
- **By interest or hobby.** Collect information about students' interests at the beginning of the year. Create interest-based groups.
- **By commonality.** Place students with others who have the same number of siblings, who were born in similar places or in the same season, or any other commonality that you glean from a "get to know each other" survey. Once they're grouped, invite students to try to figure out the category!

- **Assign seats.** Use assigned seats to give anxious fourth graders a place to call their own starting from the first day of school. Mix genders to let students know you expect boys and girls to work together, and periodically change seat assignments to give students practice working well with all of their classmates.
- **Consider student needs.** When assigning seats, consider whether certain students need to be near certain others (for example, a particularly anxious child might need to be near a friend; a child struggling with self-control may need to be with others who are not easily distracted).

■ **Be proactive.** Head off seating-group problems before they start. When creating groups, ask students, “When you move to your new groups, what can you do to be friendly to your new groupmates?” Keep an eye out for cliques or quiet negative-talk about others. Move students when necessary.

■ **Consider free seating later in the year.** As the year unfolds, you may decide your students are ready to choose their own seats. This can be incredibly empowering for fourth graders and can provide valuable lessons in sharing space. But before setting them off to choose, carefully discuss how to make good choices (being fair and inclusive, thinking about where you need to sit if you’re easily distracted by the science supplies, etc.). Then be ready to monitor choices and redirect when necessary.

When Spreading Out Doesn't Work

If you're not able to create even a temporary circle area for direct teaching, students will need to sit where they can comfortably see you and any visuals you're using. In that case, put the tables or small clusters of desks in the middle of the room. Be sure to give students lots of movement breaks. For an occasional change of scenery, let students spread out to work on the floor, at other desks or tables, or in any work-



able space they feel comfortable using once you've finished your direct teaching.

Work Standing Up? Give It a Try.

Gregory, a fourth grader I taught, was always moving. His legs bounced when he sat. He twirled in circles while standing in line. He ran for twenty minutes nonstop at recess and came inside dirty, sweaty, and still bouncy. To ask Greg to work sitting down would've been torture (for him and for me). He needed to stand. I have vivid memories of Greg working on math, standing at a table shifting from foot to foot, kicking himself in the behind as he worked. Since Greg worked productively that way, and it didn't bother anyone else, I let him continue.

Different children will find different work positions comfortable. Some, like Greg, may want to work standing. Others may prefer to grab a clipboard and sprawl on the floor or sit leaning against the wall or a floor cushion. If you can let students work in their preferred positions, the whole tone of the room may become more mellow.

Other Areas of the Classroom

Besides the circle area and desks or tables, you'll need a classroom library, areas for writing, science, and computers, and storage space. To fit all these in, think about designing multipurpose spaces. The following chart shows a few spaces that can be easily used for more than one purpose.

Area	Tips	Multiple Uses
Circle area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Make the area large enough for the whole class to gather comfortably, sitting in chairs or on the floor ■ Include an easel for teaching and for recording children's ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Morning and other meetings ■ Whole-class lessons ■ Space for reading, writing, and other work on the floor ■ Small-group instruction while others are working ■ Whole-group activities and energizers
Classroom library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Arrange bookshelves with enough space around them so that many students can browse at once ■ Try a horseshoe shape so the bookshelves create a cozy space big enough for a table or cluster of desks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Book display and storage ■ Guided reading, if you include a table ■ Conference area ■ Regular work space ■ Team project area
Writing supply area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Stock with pens, pencils, markers, paper, sticky notes, dictionaries, and thesauri ■ Post graphic organizers and writing tips from focus lessons here 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Writing supply storage ■ Writing display area ■ Writing conferences or general work space, if you include a table



Area	Tips	Multiple Uses
<p>Science supply area</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Set up a tank of murky pond water or a terrarium with bugs caught at recess; add some note sheets, magnifying glasses, and field guides, and you've got a science center! ■ Spur other science investigations by supplying batteries and bulbs, a big box of building set pieces, or kits of rocks and minerals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ongoing tinkering, observation, and exploration area, regardless of what science unit you're studying ■ Indoor recess; students will gravitate to this spot on rainy days ■ General work space, if you include a table
<p>General storage areas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Periodically clear out worn or damaged supplies or things you don't use often 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ If you have freestanding bookshelves or storage cubbies, put hooks on their backs for hanging coats and backpacks
<p>Computer area</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Arrange computers so that the children can easily move keyboards and mouse pads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ When the computers aren't in use, students can use the computer tables as work space for reading, writing, math, or other table work

Classroom Supplies

Fourth graders can do incredible work when given appropriate resources. Here's a typical day in my class. We're studying different states in social studies. Andre is busy near the sink making a plasticene replica of Mt. Rushmore. Nearby, Melissa, Mark, and Anthony are using watercolors to create portraits of famous people from the states they're studying. Elsewhere in the room, Demetri is using Popsicle sticks to recreate his state's statehouse, while Anna is graphing the population changes in her state using a meterstick, large oak tag, pencils, and colored pencils. The learning throughout the room is focused, varied, and rich.

Having a variety of quality tools and materials is crucial to achieving this kind of engaged learning. That's why it's so important to invest some thought into choosing and managing classroom supplies.

Three Keys to Keeping Your Classroom Well Supplied

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No Budget for Supplies?

If your school does not give you a supply budget but instead relies on parents to provide supplies, you could replace the traditional shopping list with assignments so that each parent donates one category to the class. For example, one parent supplies the pencils, another some markers, and so forth.

Also, you could explore using a website set up to link interested donors with classrooms:

- DONORSCHOOSE.ORG
- ILOVESCHOOLS.COM
- ADOPTAClassroom.org

- **Variety.** Having a wide choice of supplies encourages fourth graders to do creative and thoughtful work. Children of this age are gaining fine motor dexterity and are eager to learn new craft and project skills. Supplies like calligraphy pens, wax pencils, and modeling clay can challenge and delight fourth graders, adding vigor and engagement to their work.
- **Quality.** Fourth graders can be very self-critical, so they need quality supplies that enable them to do good work. Scissors need to be big enough for their hands and sharp enough to cut. Staplers need to staple easily and properly. Markers need to be fresh and moist, with caps to keep them that way.



■ **Quantity.** Having quality materials won't do much good if you don't have enough for the children to share easily. For competitive fourth graders, three pairs of nice scissors mixed in with twelve junky pairs will become the source of arguments. If only one black marker works well, students will sneak it into their cubby so they alone can use it later. Having a sufficient amount minimizes these predictable flashpoints.

Making Supplies Last the Year

Having enough supplies reduces arguing and hoarding. But having too much can lead to wastefulness. Consider rationing things like construction paper, drawing paper, and erasers. Leave enough out so there's plenty for all, but tuck some away for later in the year. Otherwise, you'll run out by mid-winter!

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Great Fourth Grade Supplies

The following chart shows examples of supplies to have in a fourth grade classroom, along with quantities for selected supplies. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point. Although the supplies are grouped by category, clearly many materials could fit in multiple categories.

Good Supplies for a Fourth Grade Classroom

Category	Early in the Year	Later in the Year	Sample Quantities
Art, social studies, projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Crayons ■ Colored pencils ■ Markers (thin and thick) ■ Drawing paper ■ Construction paper ■ Magazines (for cutting from) ■ Yarn ■ Popsicle sticks ■ Glitter ■ Toothpicks ■ Glue ■ Felt ■ Tape 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Calligraphy pens ■ Wax pencils ■ Oil pastels ■ Paints ■ Stencils ■ Modeling clay ■ Hot glue gun ■ Papier-mâché supplies ■ Colored tissue paper ■ Wire ■ Pipe cleaners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Scissors—one pair for every two students ■ Glue—one bottle for every two students ■ Markers, crayons, colored pencils—an ample supply for each table or desk cluster ■ Papier-mâché supplies, tissue paper—bring out less often, and rarely for the whole class; quantity depends on how many students will use these, and how often
Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Books, both fiction and nonfiction, multiple genres ■ Sticky notes ■ Paper for rough and final drafts ■ Pens, pencils ■ Staplers ■ Writing notebooks/journals ■ Clipboards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Books (new genres; keep cycling in new books throughout the year) ■ Highlighters ■ Note cards ■ Binders ■ Clear plastic portfolio sleeves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Books—a wide assortment, many in multiple copies ■ Pens, pencils—several dozen of each ■ Staplers—two good ones for the class to share

Good Supplies for a Fourth Grade Classroom

Category	Early in the Year	Later in the Year	Sample Quantities
Math	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rulers ■ Calculators ■ Base ten blocks ■ Pattern blocks ■ Graph paper ■ Variety of math games ■ Dice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Protractors ■ Compasses ■ Cuisenaire rods ■ New math games ■ Fraction puzzles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rulers, protractors, calculators—one for every child ■ Pattern blocks, base ten blocks, Cuisenaire rods—large containers for small groups
Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Science notebooks ■ Building sets ■ Magnifying glasses ■ Bug jars ■ Field guides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Microscopes ■ Batteries, bulbs, etc. ■ Other hands-on materials that match your curricula 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Enough for partners or small groups
Recess (indoor and outdoor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Math/logic games ■ Literacy games ■ Trivia books (also good for those few minutes when the class is lined up waiting to go to lunch or an assembly) ■ Jump ropes ■ Playground ball, football, basketball ■ Jigsaw puzzles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mad Libs ■ Board games (quick ones like Boggle, Yahtzee, etc.) ■ Computer games ■ Fun websites ■ Snow brick makers ■ Sidewalk chalk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ When supplies are limited, such as with playground balls and computers, consider a rotating sign-out system so all students have a chance to use them

See appendix for favorite books, board games, and websites for fourth graders.

Community Supplies Only

In my first couple of years teaching fourth grade, I was surprised by how much students argued about who owned which supplies. “Nicole, can I borrow your black marker?” Carradine would ask. “No. My mom bought these for me.” Carradine would push, “But you’re letting Rachel use your markers.” Nicole would shrug and Rachel would reach over and take the black marker.



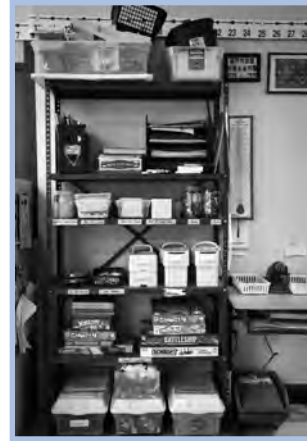
Of course, we had an ample supply of markers (and other materials) in the room, but the ones from home often seemed especially desirable. And the “private” materials presented other challenges: Some students would have better supplies than others; some would loan materials to their best friends only. Someone would accidentally break a friend’s ruler, and an argument would ensue about who should replace it.

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Finally, a colleague suggested having community supplies only. Students would bring in supplies from home only if they were willing to donate them to the class for everyone to share. Instead of getting a list of required supplies to purchase for their child, families would receive a list of supplies they could purchase for the class if they wanted to. All supplies would be kept in community bins for everyone to use, and everyone would have access to the same supplies for their work. If students had special supplies they didn’t want everyone to use, those would stay at home for project work done there.

What a transformation this made in our classroom community! A more peaceful atmosphere prevailed as the children bickered less and worked more.

If you’re going to try having community supplies, make sure to communicate with parents so they know why you’re using this system. Some parents might be confused and even upset if there isn’t a list of supplies to get for their child. I found that parents were very understanding if I explained my goals for having community supplies: building a strong community, making sure all students would have access to high-quality supplies, and helping children learn how to share and cooperate.



Location of Supplies

Letting students keep large quantities of supplies in their desks is a recipe for lost and broken supplies. It can also tempt students to use the supplies at inappropriate times.

Effective ways to house supplies in a fourth grade classroom:

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■ **On tables.** If students generally sit in desk clusters or at tables, place often-used supplies in the middle so everyone can reach them. Coloring supplies, pens, pencils, paper clips, sticky notes, and rulers can all fit easily in supply caddies or large cans.



■ **On shelves.** Keep materials like glue, staplers, and scissors in larger bins in a designated supply area. When students need something, they go to the supply area, choose what they need, and bring it back to their work area.

Classroom Displays

Displays of Student Work

In a fourth grade classroom—as in any classroom—displays should consist primarily of work the children themselves have done. Displaying student



work sends several important messages: *As teachers, we value what students do. This is their classroom as much as ours. And in this classroom, students share their work, learning from each other.* Furthermore, students will look at their own work more frequently than at commercial posters.

Some things to remember about displaying student work:

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- **Display in-process and polished pieces.** Displaying unfinished work sends the message that we value the process of learning, not just the products. Encourage students, for example, to proudly put up writing pieces with cross-outs and highlighter marks. This helps anxious fourth graders see that it's okay for learning to be messy and that mistakes are part of learning, not things to hide or avoid.
- **Use wall spaces for two-dimensional work.** Display paintings, writing samples, book reviews, and other two-dimensional work on bulletin boards and other wall spaces.
- **Reserve bookshelf tops for three-dimensional work.** Keep the tops of bookshelves clear for dioramas, models, and other three-dimensional pieces.
- **Consider adding simple shelving.** Use simple wire shelving from a hardware store along portions of walls to create more display space.
- **Keep displays current.** Take down old work and reference charts from units that are finished.

Informational Displays

In addition to display spaces for student work, you'll want to create some space for important reference charts and information. Bulletin boards should change continually, right along with the content you're teaching and the time of the school year. Some anchor charts (posters reminding students of lessons or key ideas and facts they should remember) may change often to reflect current learning. Other anchor charts will stay up all year as reminders. Ideally, the boards and charts will be centrally located for easy student reference.

Some good fourth grade informational displays:

■ Get-to-know-each-other board.

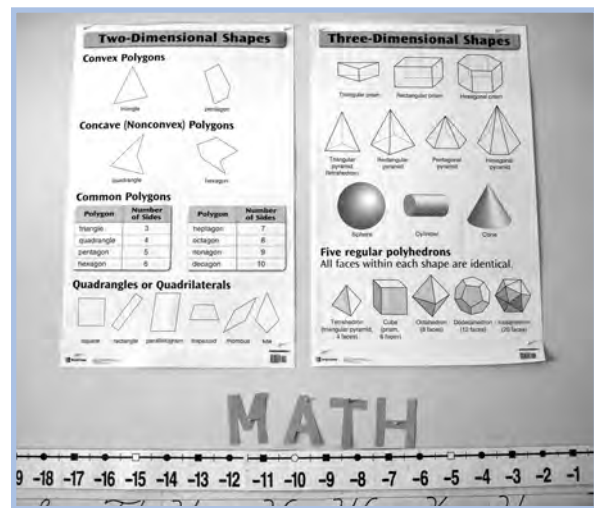
At the beginning of the year, post everyone's name (and picture, if you can) on a board with lots of space between the names. As you learn about students (Jeremy has a dog, Margaret likes to swim, Rico was born in the Dominican Republic), post information bubbles next to the names.

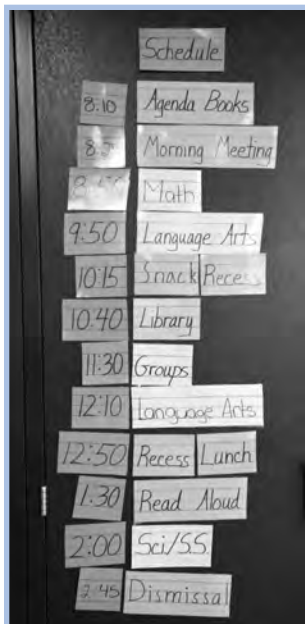
■ Birthday chart.

Posting everyone's birthdays for easy reference boosts students' sense of belonging in the classroom.

Control Clutter!

- Take down displays that are no longer relevant. Walls cluttered with charts and papers can appear messy and add to the stress levels in the room.
- Leave ample blank wall space around bulletin boards, anchor charts, and student display spaces.





or two per day) and make a big deal about each new item by sharing it with the class in a dramatic way (saving a special few minutes of the day for a “grand opening,” for example). Remove older items to avoid overwhelming your fourth graders. To make content boards interactive, invite students to add their own pictures that fit the theme, answer questions, or solve riddles. For example, if you’re studying state geography, you could invite students to find pictures of each state’s landscape in newspapers and magazines or on the Internet to post on the bulletin board.

- **Process or format reminders.** Is there a certain way students should sign and date their work? Is there a process they should use for turning in homework? Do you have criteria for good work that you expect all students to meet? If so, create some simple charts and hang them where needed.

- **Routines charts.** Have charts to help students know how to sign up for lunch and how to sign out to use the bathroom. Have an attendance chart that students fill out posted by the door. Finding ways for children to be independent with these little routines can make for a much smoother day.
- **Anchor charts from lessons.** After teaching a lesson, post a chart of a few of the key ideas that students need to remember. You might post an example of how to solve a long division problem, or a few key ideas about building a riveting opening to a piece of fiction. As students work, they can refer to these anchor charts to help them as they practice new skills.

Technology

Used well, technology can bring richness, depth, and energy to fourth graders’ learning. Fourth graders will enjoy having ample opportunity to try using various technologies as part of their work. They can design a quiz for the class on the SMART Board or create a PowerPoint presentation for a science research project. They can take digital photos on a social studies field trip and create a photo album to email to parents. They can search

Learn More about Classroom Setup

Classroom Spaces That Work by Marlynn K. Clayton (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2001).

safe websites for information about a topic they're studying. The possibilities are endless—and sure to increase as time goes on and technology changes even more.

But teachers need to make sure students are using technology appropriately. These basic guidelines should hold true no matter what new technologies enter our schools in the next few years:

- **Decide which tools students can use on their own.** Make sure any tools that students shouldn't handle on their own are safely tucked away. Fourth graders are often just capable enough to get themselves into real trouble. ("Mr. Anderson! I *know* I did everything right, but now the camera won't turn on!")
- **Monitor technology use.** Properly supervise students' use of technology, including their use of the Internet. Know your school's policy on what is considered appropriate use, teach it to your students, and stay vigilant.
- **Ask for help.** If you're uncomfortable using technological resources, ask for help from a colleague or parent.
- **Use technology purposefully.** Just because a technology is available or in vogue doesn't mean you have to use it. As with any resource, make sure the technology you use will enhance your efforts to strengthen the classroom community and make learning active, interactive, and child-centered.

Closing Thoughts

Designing a classroom around the needs of fourth graders can hugely impact your students' learning and make school life more productive and enjoyable for everyone. You'll have many issues to consider, though, so don't worry if you can't address them all. None of us can. Instead, choose a couple of ideas from this chapter to try.

Once you're comfortable with those, pick a couple more. Each year, setting up a classroom will feel a bit more comfortable as you build on your previous successes and keep tinkering and trying new ideas.

