

What Do You Need From Me?

Tuning in to the Needs of Our Students
during a Pandemic

From Nancy Steineke, author of *Classroom Management: Strategies for Achievement, Cooperation, and Engagement*.

A Note
from
Nancy Steineke



WHAT WILL THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR LOOK

LIKE? Whether it's "full speed ahead" back to school like normal, a face-to-face online learning hybrid, or 100% online learning, students will be coming to us in an environment unlike anything any of us have ever known. Because of this, it's doubly important for us to build in frequent check-ins throughout our work with our students. The best way to begin our understanding of our students is to ask, "What do you need from me?"

Though the following example lesson is set in pre-pandemic times, this lesson is just as effective with today's classes. If you are working with students in person while social distancing, ask each student to write their responses on sticky notes, stick them on an index card with their name on it, and drop them in a basket to turn them in. Read them after class, jotting down important things you want to remember about each student on the index card. Then, transfer the stickies from the card to chart paper. In the following days and weeks, return to the chart often, highlighting different ideas, and explaining how you are working to meet their needs. Every few weeks, ask students to consider what they need from you and to add more notes as necessary. As the year progresses and students know you better, their needs will change, and their willingness to share them with you will grow.

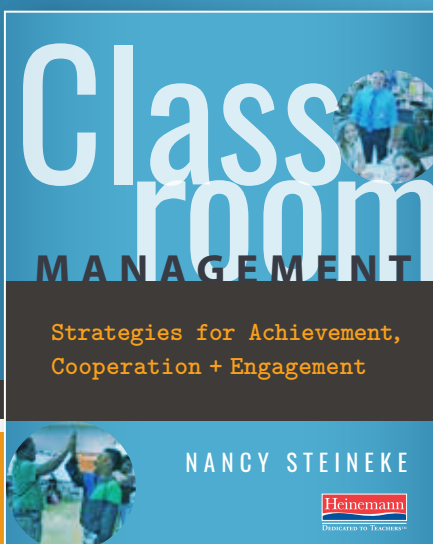
If your year is beginning online, you can still use this question to collect ideas from your students. While apps and platforms for sharing differ from district to district, do consider the following:

- How will I reach every student and elicit a response?
- How will I keep these initial responses confidential?
- How can I post all of the responses in a place where students can see them?
- How can I move this activity from a purely student-teacher communication to one that allows students to feel safe posting their ideas more publicly on a class discussion board?

However we begin our school year, a sudden change in lesson delivery is very possible, so the needs of your students are likely to evolve. It behooves us all to be in touch and in tune with students as we blaze new learning trails together.

All my best,

Nancy



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MOVE> Ask Students, “What Do You Need from Me?”

Immediate Result: Students get an immediate opportunity to advise you on how they hope the class will operate and how to respond to their learning needs.

Long-Term Result: These beginning-of-year suggestions become a touchstone for your own reflection as you plan. Actively referencing and using students’ advice builds trust. As students become more comfortable with you and their classmates, this topic can be revisited periodically. Most likely, later answers will demonstrate greater depth and insight because of the trust that has developed.

While the emphasis on class norms is typically focused on shaping student behavior, holding ourselves to the same standard shows students that we take the work of building a fair and friendly classroom seriously.

Early in the year, Mississippi seventh-grade teacher Lindsey Jones asks her students, “What do you need from me so that you can do your best learning this year?” She gives each student a sticky note and a few minutes to think and write. Sometimes students ask if they can make more than one suggestion. Lindsey answers by asking how many more sticky notes they need. Once the sticky notes are ready, she invites a row or two at a time to step up and add their stickies to a chart (see Figure 3.4).

What kinds of things do kids write?

- To just encourage us because that makes us do better
- Feedback
- Be helpful, understanding, and motivating
- Inspirational



Figure 3.4 Seventh-grade boys add their sticky-note suggestions as well as read what others have written.

- Caring
- Joyful
- Respectful
- Fun

These suggestions are nothing surprising, nothing earth-shattering, and nothing you probably aren't already trying to do. Yet actually asking students for their input recognizes students as individuals, amplifies their voices, and makes them feel totally different than when someone just assumes they know what they need. After all notes are posted, Lindsey moves the poster to her workstation, where she can reflect on her students' needs and desires and request further clarification when needed as she plans her lessons (see Figure 3.5).

As the year progresses, maybe once a quarter, revisit the chart with students. After working with you and one another, they've probably had certain concerns met while other issues might have arisen. Ask students to visit the chart and remove the sticky notes they originally wrote. Then pass out some new sticky notes. Ask, "Now that we are well into the school year, what do you need from me so that you can continue to do your best learning? If you want to repost your ideas from the beginning of the year, that's fine. If you have some different ideas you'd like to share now, write them down on the sticky notes. If you'd like to repost some of your original suggestions as well as some new ideas, that's fine as well." And then, once the suggestions are revised, continue to use your students' ideas as you plan.



Figure 3.5 Lindsey posts her seventh-grade students' suggestions on the wall where she does most of her lesson planning, which offers her a quick opportunity to cross-check her intended instruction with what students need in order to learn best.