Things to Consider Before School Begins is an excerpt from The First Weeks of School: Laying a Quality Foundation by Jane Perlmutter and Louise Burrell.

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one else said, “No, Tim’s not the only one that forgets. Why should it just be Tim?” Eventually, the students decided to put up a big sign for everybody that said, “Please remember to bring in your homework bag, the book you read at home, and anything else you need.” They made the sign and taped it to the door outside on the closet. From then on, Tim and the rest of the children remembered to bring their homework bags into the room. These wise children did a beautiful job of solving a problem and helping a friend with dignity and respect.

What happens at the beginning of the school year lays the foundation for the rest of the year. First consider what happens before the beginning—the planning that takes place before the children ever set foot in the classroom. This reflective, careful planning takes time and energy but it pays off when the class runs smoothly throughout the year.

**Things to Consider Before School Begins**

- Delve into professional books to hone your thinking about curriculum and teaching strategies.
- Reflect on the systems and procedures used in the past. Scrutinize each part carefully to find ways to improve.
- Formatively evaluate record-keeping systems you plan to use.
- Begin planning before the official teacher preparation days.
- Organize the environment to allow and encourage the children to work independently. Think through the environment by listing the learning areas you plan to include and set up the physical arrangement of the room.

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**Louise’s Reflections**

Working cooperatively to help solve a personal, as well as a classroom problem, was a big step toward the evolution of the working, caring community I wanted to develop. Also, this process of solving problems and making choices and decisions empowered my children. I could see their empowerment when I observed their attitudes toward the room, other children, and themselves. When my children were empowered they were able to draw on and further develop their intrinsic motivation.
• Select the books that you plan to read with the children to help develop the community at the beginning of the year.
• Select and arrange materials to catch the interests of the children when they first enter the class.
• Pay attention to the aesthetics of the room.
• Collect work samples from previous years’ classes to use as examples for your new class.
• Get fired up—it’s going to be a great year!

Delve into professional books to hone your thinking about curriculum and teaching strategies.

Louise started early and began her planning at home. She believes in continuous improvement and continuous learning. Teachers must be lifelong learners if they are to inspire children to adopt learning as a permanent habit. Louise loves books about teaching. She found new books and new ideas each year. She reads voraciously and finds something exciting in almost everything she reads. She has always carried books in a little book bag to read as she waited for her son or her husband to complete their various activities such as ball practice or meetings. Exploring professional books was one way Louise got excited about school each year. She collected and organized her professional books so they would be available when needed. Many were chosen to help her develop specific assignments as the year progressed, while others were for self-motivation and assessment.

Each year’s planning fell into patterns. Even before going to school and setting up her room, her first step was to organize her professional books for the beginning of the year. She looked for ideas that would help her children become self-directed and active. She knew that all children could learn, but that multiple strategies were necessary. She has collected a vast array of books that deal with teaching. Over the years, she has “prowled through them” enough to know which books have ideas that would work for her. She has highlighted extensively to mark ideas she wanted to go back to. Most of her favorite books are quite yellow with highlights on the inside. Each year she added new books to the collection to help her expand the scope of her teaching. She reflected on curriculum and the changes she planned to make. She kept the state’s curriculum framework firmly in mind and developed a clear sense of the various ways children in the same age range would respond to the required curriculum. Her aim was for children to learn the information they were supposed to learn while developing habits of mind to make good decisions and want to continue learning. One of Louise’s favorite books for help-
Louise’s Reflections

I like getting feedback from as many people as possible because I learn from other people’s thoughts and experiences. It makes me a stronger teacher. But you have to be willing to listen and be open minded. Even when the feedback is uncomfortable, you have to be willing to go beyond your current thinking and embrace new possibilities.

As she prepared at the beginning of each year, Louise picked up one resource book at a time and skimmed through it to remind herself of ideas that she had found useful. When specific needs arose, Louise searched for ways to help each child, and often her books were waiting with helpful information. Books on graphing usually came first. I See What You Mean (Moline, 1995), a book about graphic organizers, gave her more ideas for assignment prompts. Graphic organizers like charts and graphs provide tools for children to show their work in many ways. She took a section like “Simple Diagrams” and thought about how she could adapt the author’s suggestions. She never copied anything exactly. Everything had to fit into the classroom she was developing to meet the needs of the specific children each year. Each year and each group of children were different.

Nothing was accepted without reflection. She knew how important it was to develop systems or organizational structures for the children’s
work. She looked for certain books on her shelf for help. The book *I See What You Mean* has good examples of diagrams, such as the parts of a body, but there are other things Louise wanted her children to include in their work. Improvement requires consideration of earlier attempts. Several years ago she taught the children to create a chart or a diagram one step at a time. She would introduce one step, have the children practice it, and then add other steps. She noticed that the step the children were taught to do at the beginning was usually what they tended to use even after receiving further instructions. They seemed to find it difficult to integrate new steps into their working plans. This year, she planned to introduce the process as a whole and then go back over the parts as necessary, gradually polishing the work to a higher standard. She wanted the children to date their work from the first assignments. She planned to begin by having the children construct an explanatory key the first time they made a diagram, rather than waiting until the children mastered simpler steps.

Louise’s Reflections

Empowering children means giving them tools to express themselves. I created a variety of open-ended assignments for my children to do. When the children responded to their assignments, I was able to easily assess their needs. Students did most of their work in blank spiral-bound recording books. The beauty of the student recording books was that I had all their work in one place and I could easily track progress. When I looked through their books and examined their work, I saw what kinds of feedback I needed to provide for each child.

She planned to wait until later in the year to introduce other kinds of graphic organizers, such as line graphs and scale diagrams. While Louise believed that every child could learn, she was also tuned into children’s developmental patterns. Scale diagrams were to be delayed until November. Even in November, the children would not be expected to completely understand the concept of scale but they would begin to talk about it and use it in context with vocabulary dealing with scale. After working on measurement, the concept of scale might begin to make sense to some of the children. There were books in the art area that illustrated drawing to scale. Many of her books had ideas that would help children learn the tools of mathematics, science, and social studies needed to do their projects. Having a repertoire of tools to draw from would allow the children to create their own projects later in the year.
Louise’s Reflections

I want the children to embrace tools like charts, graphs, and posters to use in the development of their projects. I knew that I would need to teach them how to do these things—they wouldn’t automatically know how to construct them.

**Formatively evaluate record-keeping systems you plan to use.**

Having the children direct much of their work and complete open-ended assignments made good record-keeping a must. Louise had to keep track of each child’s work to be sure that each child was progressing well. Systems of joint record-keeping had to be developed because it would have been impossible for the teacher to do it all. As children learned how to keep their own records, they developed responsibility, had voices in what they were learning, and came to understand how they learned best.

Louise found things in many books and took from each what was needed at the time. *In the Company of Children* by Joanne Hindley (1996) focuses on the reading and writing workshop, but Louise was particularly interested in the various ways Hindley kept track of what the children were learning. This book helped Louise reflect on what she did last year and helped her update her systems for record-keeping. She considered changing her reading log. Previously, the children kept a running record of books they had read. Now she saw the need for two parts to the reading log: a list of books and a commentary on some of them. She wanted to continue having the children record books they had read, as well as keep a record of their selection patterns. She wanted to be sure they learned to select books from different genres and of varying levels. Every year, Louise modified classroom tools like the reading logs. Her most recent class used a dialogue journal and a reading log. The reading log consisted of a chart where the children had to classify the book according to genre and to rate the book according to how they felt about it. The dialogue journal provided a place to react to some books in more detail while communicating with a partner. This interaction gave the children a real audience for their work. These processes also gave the children opportunities to read, write, and record information in a variety of ways.

One of the books that influenced Louise’s system for developing children’s writing was *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* by Donald Graves (1983). His later books, *Experiment with Fiction* (1989) and *Investigate Non-fiction* (1989), helped her develop the reading chart for her children.
Louise and the children developed systems to use at the beginning of the year that could be modified when they perceived a need later in the year. For example, the children and teachers developed systems for leader of the day, cleanup, projects, book sharing, woodworking, the classroom government, and cooking. As the children used the systems during the year, they offered suggestions for improvement. With well-designed systems, the room ran smoothly. Every year Louise and her assistant, Ella, reconsidered the best places to turn in work, publishing, and homework. They decided on a large, brown plastic laundry basket that would sit near the front of the room to hold the homework bags.

**Begin planning before the official teacher preparation days.**

Every year Louise began getting ready for school before many of her colleagues. Even after more than thirty years of teaching, she was excited and full of new plans. The allotted work days at the beginning of the school year were never enough for Louise; she needed time prior to those few official, hurried teacher work days to contemplate and consider what she was going to do. She usually tried to begin about two weeks early. The extra time allowed her to work at an unhurried pace so that she would feel fresh on the first day of school. She obtained permission to work in her classroom from the janitor and principal. This planning time helped her set the foundation for the whole year. This early planning time also paid off in time saved during the year as systems ran smoothly. Her principal let her exchange extra days spent at the beginning of the year for optional teacher work days later in the year.

**Think through by listing the learning areas you plan to include and set up the physical arrangement of the room.**

Louise always started the actual process of room arrangement before school started. The room environment was complex. Before putting the furniture in place she considered all the centers or learning areas she wanted to include. The placement of each area, as well as the materials in the area, would affect the operation of the systems in the room. On her first trip into the room she simply sat in a chair and “dreamed” her room. “I tried to envision how I wanted the traffic to flow. I tried to decide on an appropriate working station for my assistant for conferences,” she said. The underlying consideration was how to best utilize the space. While Louise made decisions of ways to begin the year, every room arrangement was a work in progress throughout the year. As the children used materials, problems and needs for adjustment arose. Many times during the year, furniture was shifted and materials moved. Every new school year presented the opportunity to reconsider all the elements of the room. “Every year, I corrected some flaws and in the process created new ones.”
Louise's Reflections

Ella and I didn’t have teacher’s desks. They took up too much space and usually became collection tables for materials. We had trays and mailboxes like the children did. We kept record books about children’s work in plastic organizers. They sat out of the way on a cabinet or shelf, where we could get to the material easily. We had two two-drawer file cabinets—one was for us and the children used the other one for storing their portfolios. The file cabinets became part of the “walls” that defined the learning areas. The tops of the cabinets held terrariums and aquariums that would have been in the way on tables. We did our work with children all over the room.

Packing up at the end of each school year and starting fresh at the beginning of the next was important to Louise. Years ago she decided that every year at the end of school she would pack every bit of teaching material and begin the next year afresh. Every year for more than thirty years she had done just that. At the end of each school year, she and the children boxed and labeled and sorted all the paraphernalia that made up their room. The room for the following year was created anew from bits and pieces of all kinds of things. This kept her fresh and kept her room from becoming stagnant.

Louise built her room bit by bit for over thirty years. She did not have and did not want a collection of desks for her children. She did have a collection of assorted tables of various sizes and chairs enough to seat all the children if necessary. The primary sand table, the woodworking bench, the mailboxes, the large shelving unit (which holds the old bread trays that serve as cubbies for the children’s possessions) were all precious and part of the structure of her room.

Louise’s Reflections

I always need at least a day to rearrange furniture. If you are smart you go around and measure the spots and check before you move it. I wish I could have the children help each year. This is a great math workout. After I go away and come back, I see other things that may need changing. I walk around and check to see if there is room for the children to walk. If the chairs are pulled out back to back, is there still room to get between them?
Organize the environment to allow and encourage the children to work independently.

The learning areas or centers were central to the development of the curriculum. Before moving the furniture, Louise listed the areas she planned to include and looked at her state curriculum guide to be sure that all areas of the curriculum were covered. Materials available help determine the learning areas that a teacher will use for any one year. Teachers just beginning to use learning areas need to include at least some basic centers to provide choice and variety and meet children’s developmental needs. Basic centers for primary classrooms include reading, writing, listening, art, math, science, social studies, games, building, and dramatics. Too few centers can create problems; teachers need at least enough to take care of twenty-five to twenty-eight children in a class. Each year more centers can be added. Louise advises beginning with however many you feel comfortable with. When she first organized her room into learning areas, she did not have sand, water, cooking, sewing, or carpentry. She added one of these new learning areas each year.

Learning areas need to be defined so that children know where to work and how to find needed materials. Having a clear purpose and structure in the environment can create an underlying sense of order. Children need to live in a predictable, organized environment where everything has a place. Knowing where to locate necessary materials gives children the sense that they belong in the room and gives them a feeling of control and ownership. See Figure 1–1 for an example of Louise’s classroom floor plan.

Many things can help divide the room into areas. Bookshelves, portable blackboards, pegboards, chart racks, and other screens can all serve as dividers. Rectangular tables can also divide areas. Thick corrugated cardboard can be put between two tables to separate areas.

Teachers are often advised to group noisy areas together. However, Louise has found that strategies such as putting carpet under blocks on the shelves and on the floor in the building area can reduce noise levels. Teaching children to be aware of the noise they make and to care about disturbing others also makes the conventional wisdom of separating quiet and noisy centers less crucial.

Louise’s Reflections

I worry when I go into a quiet classroom. I’m afraid that learning isn’t taking place when children are always expected to be quiet. When children work in learning areas, I know there will be working noise. Children develop communication skills, both written and oral, only when they have
Messy areas need to be on uncarpeted spaces, if possible. Sometimes linoleum can be used over a carpeted area if no uncarpeted space is available. The art area works best on a surface that can be easily cleaned. Carpet on top of carpet is another option. This protects the school carpet (and keeps principals happy). Use duct tape to cover any raw edges on carpet or linoleum and use a double stick carpet tape to secure the piece to the floor. Bookcases can cover some edges. The opening into an area defined by a piece of linoleum or carpet should be as small as possible and the edges must be secured to prevent tripping. Interestingly, carpet under water and sand areas actually works well by preventing tracking of sand and water all over the room. Putting an extra piece of carpet over the bare floor or over the school carpet saves on cleanup.

At the end of every school year, Louise, Ella, and the children clean and pack up the classroom materials so that they are ready for the next class. She had the children organize, classify, and label the materials according to the learning area where they would be housed. At the beginning of each new school year after she had arranged furniture and planned the centers, Louise just started opening the boxes and placing materials where they were needed. Many elements had to be considered: “Can the children reach it easily? Can they return it easily? Is there a good place to use it?” A lid keeps the dust out but also keeps the children out. Everything in the room must have a place and be organized and sorted in ways that will make sense to the children. For example, in the water center, boats and ships for dramatic play filled one tub, and materials to use for sink and float were in another. Two different systems for measuring were stored in separate tubs. All over the room, Louise and Ella used bricks to support narrow boards that made single storage shelves on top of tables. Each work area was equipped with tools for children to use as needed. The aim for the room arrangement was to empower children to use what they needed when they needed it.

Louise believes that learning is social and that children need to interact with each other as well as with teachers, so shelves and furniture purposely divided the room into many cozy corners for two or three children to work. There were also places where one child could find some privacy. There was a large space for the whole group to gather for instruction or council meetings.
Louise’s Reflections

I’ve found that if children feel a part of and value their working areas, they will work hard to develop the self-control they need to use them. They become very protective of the classroom as a whole. Children will watch to be sure that their friends are taking care of the materials in the class. They expect to see quality in the efforts of everyone. Peer pressure plays an important part in helping children develop self-control. Some children who tune out adult voices will listen to their peers.

Description of Learning Areas

Group Meeting Area, Books, and Games

The classroom had a large group meeting area where the children and their teachers could gather for instruction, whole group discussions, either teacher or student led, and council meetings. A chalkboard or white board needed to be accessible to the teacher and the group for recording results of meetings, outlining tasks to be done, and giving examples of work. The meeting area also served as the main part of the classroom library and was filled with books of all kinds. Louise’s books, collected over many years, included series of children’s favorites like Box Car and American Girls, science books organized by topic, easy readers, and chapter books. Her large collection was lovely but is not essential. Teachers’ personal collections can grow and be supplemented. Libraries have books to be borrowed. Parents will donate materials and yard sales are good sources for school materials. The listening center was at a table near the far wall. Books and tapes were available for children to listen to undisturbed.

The bookshelves that formed the main part of the classroom library and the puppet stage defined the group area. The feeling was of a room within a room. After the morning group activities were completed, this area was used for many purposes. Louise stored games and puzzles on shelves near the group area so children could use the space to work and play games with friends. This space was large enough for the teachers to meet with individuals or small groups while other children were working. The puppet stage and dramatic play materials (including musical instruments) needed to be nearby so that actors and puppeteers had a place for their audiences to sit. Later in the year this space could accommodate project presentations and large group sharing. During the “Drop Everything and Read” (DEAR) time all other areas in the room were closed and many children liked to get comfortable on the
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