First Day of School: objectives and expectations

It is the first day of school. Your students have never met you or each other. In about fifteen minutes, welcome them, learn their names the way they want to be called, build a few class agreements with them (not at them), and teach and practice one attention signal. The goal is a room that knows you care and knows you mean it.

Normal: A real Monday. Students test the edges. The boundary question comes twice, a side conversation starts during introductions, someone asks to use the restroom mid-activity, and the attention signal needs a second practice before it works.

Your focus: Hold warmth and expectations at the same time; redirect privately and keep the lesson moving.

By the end of 15 minutes you will

1. Greet every student and use each student's name the way they want it said.
2. Introduce yourself as a whole person: who you are, why you teach, what this class is for.
3. Co-create three class agreements with students, each tied to why it helps us learn together.
4. Teach one attention signal, model it, and have the class practice it at least once.
5. Ask at least two get-to-know-you questions that invite students' lives and interests into the room.
6. Answer a student's 'are you gonna be strict?' question with warmth and clear expectations at the same time.

What we expect from you

- Warm demander, not drill sergeant and not best friend: care and high expectations together.
- Agreements over rules: students help write them, and each one has a reason.
- Teach routines like content: explain, model, practice, give specific feedback.
- Redirect privately and with the least intrusive move first (look, proximity, name).
- Students' names, languages and lives are assets, not problems to manage.

Day 1: Who We Are and How We Learn Together

15 minutes. Materials: Whiteboard and marker, your attention signal, a question for the board.

0-2 min

Welcome at the door

Greet each student by asking their name and what they like to be called. Smile, say it back, and say one welcoming thing.

"Hi, I'm ___. What's your name? ...And what do you like to be called?"

2-4 min

Who I am

Introduce yourself as a whole person: where you are from, why you teach, one thing you love outside school, and what this class is for.

"I teach because ___. In here, everybody's thinking matters, including yours."

4-7 min

Who we are

Name circle: each student says their name and answers one question. Write the question on the board. Let anyone pass and come back.

"Name, and one thing you're really good at that school doesn't know about yet."

7-11 min

Our agreements

Ask what students need from a class and from a teacher to do their best work. Turn their words into three agreements on the board and ask 'why does that help us learn?' for each.

"What does a classroom where all of us are brilliant look like? What do we agree to so we get there?"

11-14 min

Teach one routine

Teach your attention signal: explain why, model it, practice it, give specific praise, practice once more.

"When I say 'Class, class', you say 'Yes, yes', and eyes come up here. Let's try it."

14-15 min

Close

Say every name you can from memory, thank them, and preview tomorrow.

"Tomorrow we start ___. I'm glad you're here."

Attention getters

Pick one for today. Teach it like content: say why, model it, practice it, praise specifically, practice again.

Ago / Amee

You: "Ago!"
Class: "Amee!"

Akan (Ghana) call-and-response: 'May I have your attention?' / 'You have it.' Explain where it comes from when you teach it.

Class, class

You: "Class, class!"
Class: "Yes, yes!"

Match the response to how you say the call: whisper it, sing it, say it slowly.

Hands up, voices off

You: Raise your hand silently
Class: Students raise a hand and finish their sentence

No voice needed; good after group work.

Countdown

You: "Back to me in 5, 4, 3..."
Class: Finish your thought, eyes up by 1

Gives a respectful moment to wrap up instead of a cut-off.

Clap pattern

You: Clap a short rhythm
Class: Class claps it back

Let students invent the class rhythm on day 2: their signal, their room.

Our class call

You: A call the class writes together
Class: Their response

Co-create it in the first week. Ownership makes it stick.

Cultivating the classroom: structure without control

Be a warm demander

Care and high expectations come together. Warm demanders value relationships with everyone in the room, demand high performance, and deal openly with cultural issues (Ware, 2006, in Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016).

Expect excellence, honor culture, build consciousness

Culturally relevant teaching holds academic success, cultural competence and critical consciousness together (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Structure serves learning; it is not compliance for its own sake.

Connections, routines, positive expectations

Start with positive connections, develop predictable routines, and define and teach positive expectations (OSEP/PBIS, 2025). Teach a routine like content, then reinforce it (WWC, 2008).

Agreements, not compliance rules

Skip silent hallways and 'eyes tracking'. Build agreements like 'we protect each other's thinking time' with students and revisit them.

Least intrusive, private first

Look, move closer, use a name, have a private word. Harsh or exclusionary discipline falls hardest on students of color and makes students feel unwelcome (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2023).

Compliance rules (leave these)	Community agreements (build these)
Silent hallways, "eyes tracking," SLANT	"We protect each other's thinking time"
Rules handed down on day one	Agreements built with students and revisited
Public consequences	Private, least-intrusive redirection first
"Because I said so"	Every norm tied to why it helps us learn together