

Creating and Using Norms

How are norms different from rules?

Rules serve an important function in school communities. Rules are non-negotiable. They are created by adults and must be followed at all times. Some examples of rules include prohibitions against violence or offensive language.

Norms serve a different but equally important function. Norms are the agreements we make with each other. They represent community goals, and as such all classroom members should be given the opportunity to contribute to their creation. Some examples of norms include the active participation of all classroom members and “leave no trace.”

Norm guidelines

Norms are created and used in many different ways across schools. In general, you may want to consider the following guidelines:

- Write norms in student-friendly language
- Prioritize a few key norms
- Post the norms in a clearly visible space
- Provide opportunities to monitor and address norm progress (or setback)

Norms exist to be used by students, thus students must be able to define and explain them. Additionally, choosing a few norms (no more than six) will promote student familiarity and ownership of the norms. Beyond participating in the creation of norms, students must be given regular opportunities to interact with the norms through self-reflection, peer and class assessment, and discussion.

How can I create norms with my students?

There are many ways to create norms. The simplest way is to ask students to generate a list of norms they might want to adopt. However, without proper framing, this activity may be difficult for students previously unfamiliar with norms. Here are some suggestions for how to introduce norms to your classroom:

- Read a story about a model school or classroom. Ask students to identify the traits that made this environment successful.
- Have students brainstorm a list of “ideal classroom” characteristics. Identify trends and use these trends to start discussion around norms.
- Ask older students to write a reflection on their most (or even least) successful team experience. Identifying the specific qualities of these situations can support norm creation.
- Begin a conversation or activity with students about the differences between the law and common practices. For example, there is no law that students must give up their seat to the elderly on public transportation, but many of them do. Ask them to reflect on other similar situations in order to begin a conversation around norms.

After generating lists of potential norms, you may want to have students vote on their favorites. You may also want to have students sign a class contract pledging their commitment to the norms.

How are norms monitored?

Inviting students to participate in norm creation is essential but not sufficient. In order for norms to work they need to consistently “live” in your classrooms. Here are some suggestions to help make norms an active presence:

- Have students make posters of what the norms look and sound like. For example, your class may choose “respect” as a norm, but in order to promote respect there must be common agreement about what respect involves.
- At consistent intervals, have students assess which norm they would like to award a ‘star’ (meaning this norm is alive and well in the classroom) and which norm they would like to designate as a ‘stair’ (meaning more focus is required). Have students support their choices with specific evidence.
- Choose a norm of the day, week, or month on which to focus. Provide consistent opportunities for reflection on progress.
- Create norm spies. Assign students as spies to each other. At the end of the day/week, have them report out on a time they saw their subject following the norm. Alternatively, you can assign spies based on the norms - such as the respect spy. It is that spy’s job to announce three students who he/she “caught” following the norm. Make sure all students get a chance to be the spy!

The effective implementation of class norms empowers students to take ownership of classroom culture. They make expectations explicit and recognize student voice. Norms help to promote an environment where all students feel safe, respected, and valued.