

back in the

groove

**10 tips for students
to start the year on
the right foot**

BY ROBIN ROENKER

The 2020-2021 school year was unlike any other. Millions of students spent part — or most — of the year learning remotely. After months physically away from teachers, classmates and a traditional school day structure, some kids may feel a little out of practice when it comes to tackling the start of a “normal” school year this fall.

Here are some practical tips from educators, administrators and counselors to help students get the school year started off right:



1 Know it's OK to ask for help.

Encourage your child to ask teachers and other school staff for assistance, whether the issue is simple — like the location of the nearest restroom — or more in-depth, like needing extra help with a school subject or mental health support. This is particularly important for students starting at a different school because simply navigating a new building can feel intimidating. “We want students to know it’s OK to not be OK. It’s OK to ask for help,” says Michelle Sandoval Villegas, a math teacher at Parkland Pre-Engineering Middle School in El Paso, Texas. “We want to reassure students that they’re in a safe haven at school, which is something that’s been lacking for so many students during the pandemic.”



2 Set small, manageable goals.

If your student feels anxious about diving back into in-person learning and all it entails — navigating physical class changes, keeping papers organized, interacting with peers — then setting specific, manageable goals for the first days back may help. “Coming back can be a lot for a student, especially if they’ve been out for a year and a half, like some kids,” says Cody Strahan, a robotics teacher at Ramay Junior High School in Fayetteville, Ark. To ease the transition, create micro-goals for the first few days back. Encourage your child to first locate classrooms and learn teacher names and class routines, then prioritize reconnecting with friends, Strahan advises.

helpful apps

Could your child benefit from an app to stay organized and on top of studies this year? Here are a few for students to try:



CALENDAR APPS

Log important dates into a calendar app like Google Calendar or iCalendar to keep up with assignment deadlines and test dates.



CONVERSATION STARTER

Teachers and students can engage in fun, interactive learning and shared discussion via apps like FlipGrid.



TEAM APPROACH

Streamline group messaging for that next collaborative project with a group chat app such as GroupMe.



STUDY AIDS

Khan Academy offers free online tools — including helpful explanatory videos — to help master lessons in English, math, science and more.



IDEA WALL

Apps like Padlet let teachers and students create shareable digital bulletin boards where students can create a collaborative book review, build group digital projects, respond to teachers' open-ended questions and more.



TEST REVIEW

Check readiness for upcoming exams with a study review app like Quizlet, which provides ready-made flash cards on an array of topics.



NOTETAKING APPS

Keep track of to-do lists or even brainstorm notes and essay outlines using a notetaking app like Evernote, Google Keep or Microsoft OneNote.



3 Create a morning checklist.

Let's face it: Heading to in-person school does require remembering to pack a lot of things, particularly if your kids are doing after-school programs or sports. If your children are feeling rusty about the early morning rush out the door, make a daily backpack checklist using a whiteboard or sticky notes, so they won't forget any essentials. This system has worked well for Twainna Calhoun, principal of Good Hope Middle School in West Monroe, La., and her fifth grade twins, who use it to double-check that they have grabbed their lunches, classwork and other important items — and that they've charged and packed their Chromebooks — before they leave for school each day.



Do your research.

In areas of the country where group tours for incoming students aren't yet possible, schools are finding creative, virtual ways to welcome new students, including YouTube instructional videos, online PowerPoint demonstrations, Zoom chats with counselors, social media posts and more. "We've done lots of interactive videos for our incoming sixth graders — from how car drop-off works and what type of bookbag to bring to how to pick up your lunch in the cafeteria," Calhoun says. Help your child learn the ins and outs of a new school before arriving on campus. Knowing what to expect can help cut down on first-day anxiety.



5 Attend orientation events.

Take full advantage of in-person orientation sessions. Students can get an early chance to map out classroom locations, learn daily schedules and meet teachers, all of which can help make the first day feel more comfortable. Orientations also offer the chance to explore school support services, including tutoring and counseling assistance, as well as extracurricular clubs and teams. In Marathon, Wis., students who attend the annual "Freshman Jumpstart" at Marathon High School get to meet every teacher at the school, learn study tips and pointers for navigating high school, practice pathways through the building, explore clubs, pre-purchase a yearbook — and even walk away with door prizes like locker organizers or scientific calculators. "Kids come away able to plan out their day — 'this is where I'll sit at lunch, this is when I'll walk to my locker,'" says principal David Beranek. "It helps reduce that nervousness that they're going to get lost."

6 Prioritize mental health.

Encourage your children to speak up if they are feeling overly stressed, anxious or depressed. And remind them that school counselors are there to help. “We know we’ve got to take care of mental health before we can expect to see students academically achieve,” says Josh Godinez, a counselor at Centennial High School in Corona, Calif. And while the pandemic has been challenging for everyone, give your children permission to feel proud of the ways they have shown personal growth over the past year and a half. “Instead of focusing only on learning gaps or learning loss, it’s also important to reframe the conversation, so that we can celebrate the personal resilience students have shown,” Godinez says.



7 Be present and participate.

If your children are worried they may have fallen behind after months without in-person learning, encourage them to prioritize being active and engaged in class this year. “Excellent attendance is key to closing learning gaps,” says Bill Ziegler, principal of Pottsgrove High School in Pottstown, Pa. “Show up every day committed to giving your best effort, building relationships and having a curious mindset.”

8 Read emails.

It may feel old-school, since most teens prefer to communicate via apps and texts. But as far as school communications go, email is where it’s at. Make sure your kids’ school-provided email accounts are active and that they monitor them regularly, particularly in the weeks leading up to the start of school. They should look for updates from the guidance counselor, principal and classroom teachers, in particular.

9 Be open-minded about new class opportunities.

Part of the richness of middle school and high school is the opportunity to select courses that align with personal interests — whether it’s a foreign language, art, computer coding, drama or orchestra class. Make sure your kids take advantage of this chance to grow their talents and explore passions. Elective classes offer “a way to try things out, see what you like, and maybe identify some things that you don’t like,” Strahan says. Above all, students should be open-minded. They might discover an interest or talent they weren’t expecting. “Middle school offers students a wonderful opportunity to learn new things about themselves,” says Sandoval Villegas, who hopes students arrive at school this fall believing in themselves and their abilities. “If anyone has proven their resilience, it’s been these students all across the world this year,” she says.

helping early learners get ready for school

If you're parenting a soon-to-be kindergartner, there are simple, fun things you can do to help get them ready for the new, in-person school year. Brycial Williams, a first grade teacher at Wynne Primary School in Wynne, Ark., shared these ideas:

- ▶ Read together each night.
 - ▶ Sing and recite nursery rhymes together.
 - ▶ Retell or act out stories using props or toys.
- ▶ Have your child practice holding a pencil and crayon correctly.
 - ▶ Set a goal of having your child be ready, by the first day of school, to:
 - Write their first name.
 - Recite and recognize the alphabet.
 - Count and recognize numbers one through 20.
 - Be comfortable using a computer and mouse.
 - Write two to three simple sentences (even if phonetically).



10 Get involved.

Whether starting a new school or returning, students should take a moment to explore clubs and extracurricular opportunities with fresh eyes. Perhaps they discovered a passion for cooking, chess or volunteering during the pandemic. They can use the new school year to seek out opportunities to join peer groups with similar interests. “I always tell students to make sure they get involved,” says Albert Sackey, principal of Hommocks Middle School in Larchmont, N.Y. “I encourage them to join clubs, play sports, join a team — anything that will help them meet new people and remain connected to school.” Sherlyn Bratcher, a counselor at Butler County High School in Morgantown, Ky., agrees. “If you just come to school and take classes and don’t participate in anything else, you’re not going to enjoy it as much as you would if you meet and engage with other students who share similar interests,” she says.