

# It May Begin With The Seating Chart Setting Up Students with Special Needs For Success!

The summer break has ended, and hopefully, you're getting back into the swing of things to prepare for the 2013-2014 school year. Whether it's materials, classroom set-up, curricula, teacher partnerships or simply re-conditioning to wake up early enough for school again, the beginning of each school year gives us all an opportunity to try something new. This is a good time to examine some of the smaller issues in our classroom that we often lose time for as classes and rehearsals get more involved.

While setting up our rooms, we are typically thinking strategically in regards to student learning, our teaching methods and philosophy. We can read article after article, in the educational textbooks and journals, about the importance of classroom management, how to be fair and consistent with reprimands/warnings, following up on behavioral consequences, and establishing written and spoken rules in the classroom. All of these practices are good, but what if you had the ability to stop inappropriate behavior before class begins, and without saying a word? Maybe the answer lies with a good seating chart.

Everyone's school districts and school buildings are different, but there are many things that are the same; due to federal and PA state law. For every student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), each teacher needs to view that student's IEP with signature required. In addition, many teachers will receive information about students with a 504 Plan. The main differences, between schools, may be the way this information is shared. In my district, I'm fortunate enough, to have a software program that lists the students in each class with parent/guardian contact information and also with symbols for student disabilities. This means that I am reminded of which students have IEP's and, in the case of physical disorders, the program informs me of which students have a "visual disorder" or "hearing disorder" or etc... Using this software program, I can easily see who's IEP's I need to read, prepare my room for students with disabilities and generate a seating chart to help all of the learners in that class do their best.

In a good seating chart, the teacher is doing all they can to accommodate all learners in the best possible way. Not knowing new students will always leave room for possible changes later in the week or school year. But, for the most part, if you can see a class on paper/computer screen, correctly identify the

needs of each student as best as possible (i.e. physical, mental disorder, socio-emotional, or maybe regular ed. with no disability), you can typically come up with a reasonable seating chart for a classroom of students that will help most of the students. For example, you can place students with a visual disorder, or students who need less distractions towards the front of the classroom. With my seating chart (inclusionary room), I tend to place my students boy, girl, boy, girl throughout the seating grid, account for students with various special needs throughout the classroom, based on their particular need, and fill in the remainder of the seating chart with regular education students who possess no documented disabilities. Knowing a student from a previous year (ex. sixth to seventh grade) helps in the process, but sometimes there are unknowns that will have to be worked out later (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**

Door							
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	
	Agatha (Mental Dis.)	Quinn (Reg. Ed.)	Susan (Reg. Ed.)	Caleb (Gifted)	Anne (Reg. Ed.)	Barry (Wheelchair Bound, but Reg. Ed.)	
	Robert (Reg. Ed.)	Madison (Gifted)	Tom (Mental Dis.)	Margaret (Reg. Ed.)	Tim (Gifted)	Jillian (Reg. Ed.)	
	Cynthia (Reg. Ed.)	James (Cognitive Disability.)	Allison (Reg. Ed.)	John (Reg. Ed.)	Janet (Reg. Ed.)	Luke (Reg. Ed.)	
	Paul (Reg. Ed.)	Mary (Visual Dis.)	Peter (Attentional Issues.)	Abigail (Hearing Dis.)	Frank (Autistic)	Beth (Down Syndrome)	
						White Board/Teacher/Director	

While Figure 1 demonstrates a seated general music classroom; ideal for more secondary music classes (7-12), instrumental groups would not use the above (Figure 1) chart as their seating chart template as their seating is based on the instrumental sections of the ensemble. Perhaps all of the above students would represent one or two instrumental sections of the entire ensemble. For

instrumental ensembles, the focus is more on assigning seats within each instrumental section (i.e. trumpet, clarinet, saxes, percussion) that will best help students with disabilities. Fortunately, with each student having a stand full of music, there is no need to adjust the seating for visual disorders. However, in the case of most other disabilities (ex. ADHD, Autism, Down Syndrome), you'll want to be sure to seat these students among other, good, helpful students that will assist in keeping them on track. The goal is to identify which students in your ensemble/classes need special considerations, depending on their disabilities and exceptionalities, and place them appropriately in your room.

For the purpose of workstations and group cooperative learning exercises, I've labeled group numbers on Figure 1 outlining groups of four. I intentionally created groups of four within the large group that will have a mix of regular ed. students and those with disabilities. When students divide into these groups, there will be a mix of regular ed. and students with disabilities in each smaller group.

Why not just let students choose their seats and change them later when a problem arises? After all, they will be happier getting to choose which friends to sit with, and they know where they will do well, right? While students will enjoy picking a friend to sit with, or stand/sit with in the case of a choral classroom, they often don't know (and depending on child's age) what is best for them in regard to their disabilities and personal achievement. That is why they have a teacher to attend IEP meetings, formatively and summatively assess them, and plan for their success. In regard to classroom management, when students realize that the teacher has pro-actively assigned their seats before they even enter the classroom, this has a great effect on their initial perception of the teacher's organization level and ability to teach them. In addition, they will most likely feel that the teacher is definitely in control of the classroom and not them.

While some students may feel disgruntled that they aren't allowed to automatically sit next to their best friend, other students (who often get excluded) will feel a sense of relief that the decision was made for them. How will they know where to sit? How will I communicate their place in the band room or on the choral risers? Simply place a copy or two of the seating chart at the entrance to the room and have fun watching the students find their locations. Don't answer any questions concerning the details of why students were selected to sit in certain places. Just tell them that based on what you know of the class, you think it is the best arrangement and you like to have these things sorted out on the first day. Note: You can have students earn their way to sit in a different spot.

Designing your rehearsal/class seating chart prior to student entrance also does a couple of other things besides assisting with classroom management and better behavior:

1. If a student has special needs (i.e. Autism, Down Syndrome, Visual Impairment, etc...) or exceptionalities (in the gifted program) they won't be "singled out" as much for those differences while arranging students in the room. While it may be impossible to keep their condition completely confidential, at least they won't be getting moved to the front row/riser/seat of the classroom after the first class in reaction to the teacher's late observation and in front of the class full of students.
2. You have the opportunity to think ahead and pair students together who can help each other. Depending on the students, there may be one or two, in an inclusionary room, who are socially mature and academically advanced enough to be a peer tutor and assist with classroom group/paired activities. There are many regular education students who are very good at helping students with special needs in a variety of ways (i.e. staying on task, restating the information, practicing one on one or in a group with other students).

Of course, to really know where to best place students in your classroom, you need to have a working understanding of the many disabilities and student conditions that are in your classroom, and what modifications, adaptations and accommodations they entail. Much of this information can be obtained from a student's IEP plan or 504 Plan; if they should have one. If still in doubt, after the first class meeting, about a particular student, consult your special education teachers, learning aides, and guidance counselors. Some of my previous articles have useful information regarding various disabilities and some strategies to employ. You can access them on the web from [www.pmea.net](http://www.pmea.net). Look for the top menu bar and select "Specialty Areas." From there, click on the "Educating Students w/Special Needs" link and click on the various articles. A very special thank you to Dave Weiss for this feature of the PMEA web page.

As the PMEA Educating Students with Special Needs Chair, I'm very much interested in increasing the awareness and dialogue regarding students with disabilities in our music classrooms. If you are a *Facebook* user, you can be part of our PMEA Students with Special Needs Forum. After logging in to your existing Facebook account, simply go to our [www.pmea.net](http://www.pmea.net) site and locate the Specialty Areas tab at the top of the page. Follow the Educating Students With Special Needs link and click on the PMEA Students With Special Needs Forum on Facebook link.



*Jeffrey Cooper, B.S. Mu. Ed, M.A. Psy, is the PMEA Students with Special Needs Chair. He is a middle school vocal music teacher at The Colonial Middle School, Colonial School District, in Plymouth Meeting, PA*