Arrange Classroom Seating to be Conducive to Structured Interactions

Develop a seating arrangement that is conducive to alternate student pairs and groups, while maintaining visibility to you and necessary reference points (the board, displayed response frames, etc.). Arrange desks or tables so students will be able to easily partner with two different classmates. For example, students seated in desks arranged in a set of four can work in partners with the students sitting across from each other for one week, then partner students sitting next to each other the subsequent week.

The following are possible seating arrangements conducive to regular structured interactions:
    • paired rows – one partner to the side and one partner behind
    • tables or desks groups - one partner across and one beside
    • chevron – one partner to the side and one behind

Assign and Alternate Appropriate Partners

Allow random partnering the first few weeks of school in order to observe student behavior and social skills, and to analyze academic needs. Provide a response frame that enables students to privately write and submit a statement about four students within the class with whom they would feel comfortable and productive working with during partner or group interactions. Tell students that you will do your best to accommodate their requests and that you will try to partner them with at least one or more of their choices over the course of the school year. Assign partners but change pairings at regular intervals so students have the opportunity to experience working with different individuals. Assigning and alternating partners will foster expectations that collaborative interactions are an integral part of your learning environment.

Carefully consider the following variables when determining appropriate partners:
    • English language proficiency
    • Communicative competence, including speaking and listening
    • Reading and writing proficiency (review data from multiple assessment e.g. SRI, state, and grade-level reading and writing assessments, etc.)
    • Attendance record
    • Performance on assignments and during activities in the class
    • Gender and/or maturity
    • Personality traits (i.e. reserved, insecure, extroverted, class clown, domineering, etc.)
    • Background (culture, community involvements, prior experiences)

After considering the above variables, it is also crucial to avoid paring high-performing students with low-performing students in terms of academic competence. High students can be placed with other high or mid-level performing students. It is also wise to avoid partnering your weakest and neediest students together. The following process can be used occasionally to assign partners according to literacy and language skills. Rank your students numerically from highest (1, 2, 3) to lowest (28, 29, 30), then pair them at the mid point:
    #1 is paired with #15;
    #2 is paired with #16;
    #3 is paired with #17; and so on until #15 is paired with #30.

Carefully observe how these partners work together and adjust as necessary. Avoid using literacy and language ranking as your only means to pair students as it will limit student experiences with classmates.

Pair two students who are flexible, reliable, and socially competent who are willing to take on the added responsibility of substituting when a classmate is absent. When a student is absent, have one of the substitutes work with the student missing a partner. Have the remaining substitute work with a pair of students who might benefit from an extra contributor. Remember to have the additional student in all trios work as a second number 2 or second "B" in structured partnering tasks in order to keep interactions automatic and consistently paced, and avoid having to cue interactions for a random trio.

Instruct and provide the means for students early to easily notify you immediately if their partner is absent, or to alert you about any issues. This will enable you to efficiently assign a substitute or adjust pairs before beginning instruction and avoiding interruptions to your prepared lessons.