



## What Makes a Good School Culture?

**M**ost principals have an instinctive awareness that organizational culture is a key element of school success. They might say their school has a “good culture” when teachers are expressing a shared vision and students are succeeding—or that they need to “work on school culture” when several teachers resign or student discipline rates rise.

However, like many organizational leaders, principals may get stymied when they actually try to describe the elements that create a positive culture. It’s tricky to define, and parsing its components can be challenging. Amid the push for tangible outcomes like higher test scores and graduation rates, it can be tempting to think that school culture is just too vague or “soft” to prioritize.

That would be a mistake, according to Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell, an expert in education leadership and management. As she explains, researchers who have studied culture have tracked and demonstrated a strong and significant correlation between organizational culture and an organization’s performance. Once principals understand what constitutes culture—once they learn to see it not as a hazy mass of intangibles but as something that can be pinpointed and designed—they can start to execute a cultural vision.

At a recent session of the National Institute for Urban School Leaders at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Bridwell-Mitchell took a deep dive into “culture,” describing the building blocks of an organization’s character and fundamentally how it feels to work there.



## Culture Is Connections

A culture will be strong or weak depending on the interactions between individuals in the organization, she said.

**In a strong culture, there are many overlapping and cohesive interactions among all members of the organization.** As a result, knowledge about the organization's distinctive character—and what it takes to thrive in it—is widely spread and reinforced. **In a weak culture, sparse interactions make it difficult for people to learn the organization's culture,** so its character is barely noticeable and the commitment to it is scarce or sporadic.

- Beliefs, values, and actions will spread the farthest and be tightly reinforced when everyone is communicating with everyone else. In a strong school culture, leaders communicate directly with teachers, administrators, counselors, and families, who also all communicate directly with each other.
- A culture is weaker when communications are limited and there are fewer connections. For example, if certain teachers never hear directly from their principal, an administrator is continually excluded from communications, or any groups of staff members are operating in isolation from others, it will be difficult for messages about shared beliefs and commitments to spread.

## Culture Is Core Beliefs and Behaviors

Within that weak or strong structure, what exactly people believe and how they act depend on the messages—both direct and indirect—that the leaders and others in the organization send. A good culture arises from messages that promote traits like collaboration, honesty, and hard work.

**Culture is shaped by five interwoven elements, each of which principals have the power to influence:**

1. **Fundamental beliefs and assumptions**, or the things that people at your school consider to be true. For

example: “All students have the potential to succeed,” or “Teaching is a team sport.”

2. **Shared values**, or the judgments people at your school make about those beliefs and assumptions—whether they are right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust. For example: “It’s wrong that some of our kindergarteners may not receive the same opportunity to graduate from a four-year college,” or “The right thing is for our teachers to be collaborating with colleagues every step of the way.”
3. **Norms**, or how members believe they should act and behave, or what they think is expected of them. For example: “We should talk often and early to parents of young students about what it will take for their children to attend college.” “We all should be present and engaged at our weekly grade-level meetings.”
4. **Patterns and behaviors**, or the way people actually act and behave in your school. For example: There are regularly scheduled parent engagement nights around college; there is active participation at weekly team curriculum meetings. (However, in a weak culture, these patterns and behaviors can be different than the norms.)
5. **Tangible evidence**, or the physical, visual, auditory, or other sensory signs that demonstrate the behaviors of the people in your school. For example: prominently displayed posters showcasing the district’s college enrollment, or a full parking lot an hour before school begins on the mornings when curriculum teams meet.

Each of these components influences and drives the others, forming a circle of reinforcing beliefs and actions, Bridwell-Mitchell says; strong connections among every member of the school community reinforce the circle at every point. ■

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# Back-To-School Message from Our Executive Director

*Dear AAE Members and Friends,*

Back-to-school season is filled with the optimism and anticipation that comes with each new school year. No two school years are ever the same. This aspect unique to education comes with it extraordinary opportunities and boundless potential to positively change every life we touch along the way. However, we also know that with this comes challenges and unexpected turns. We are grateful that, as part of your deep commitment to your students, you've chosen AAE as your professional association to ensure your focus remains where it should always be—with them and on their success.

The Association of American Educators, our state chapters, and our entire staff kick off this back-to-school season with equal parts optimism and focus. We share your excitement for what lies ahead this year and will continue to provide you with the latest professional resources, advocacy tools, and training opportunities to maintain your professional leadership and achieve your goals for professional growth.

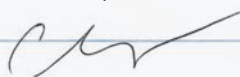
We also stand by, ready to support your professional rights and hard-earned reputation with our legal services team supported by your liability insurance policy's job protection benefits. We will also be increasing our outreach to you to help you amplify your voice regarding the issues that matter to educators.

This year marks our 25th year of operation, and we enter it with renewed vigor and energy to support and serve you and your colleagues.

We at AAE thank you for everything you do for the benefit of our students and the nation.

Have a wonderful school year!

Sincerely,



Colin Sharkey  
Executive Director



Are you or someone you know interested in joining the AAE family?



Visit [aaeteachers.org/membership](http://aaeteachers.org/membership) to find out why more and more educators are making the nonunion choice with AAE membership.

## Share Your Back-To-School Story!

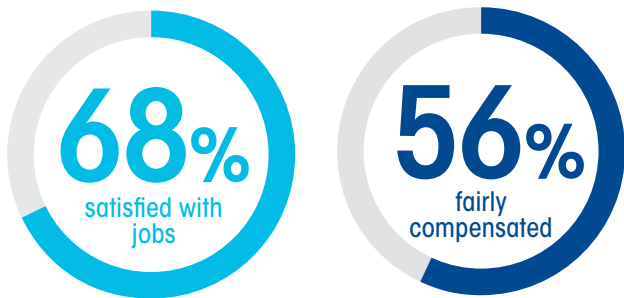
Do you have a great back-to-school story to share? Send it to [editor@aaeteachers.org](mailto:editor@aaeteachers.org) and we will feature it on our blog!

Also, find the latest news about all things education by visiting [aaeteachers.org/blog](http://aaeteachers.org/blog) today! Don't forget to subscribe to our RSS feed!

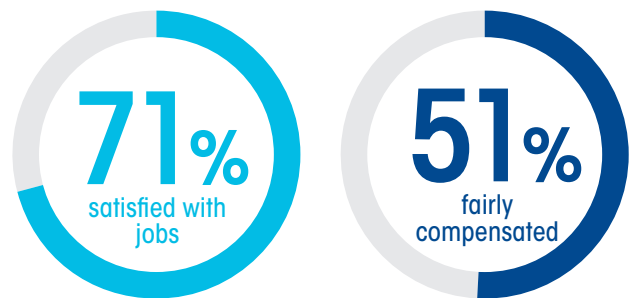




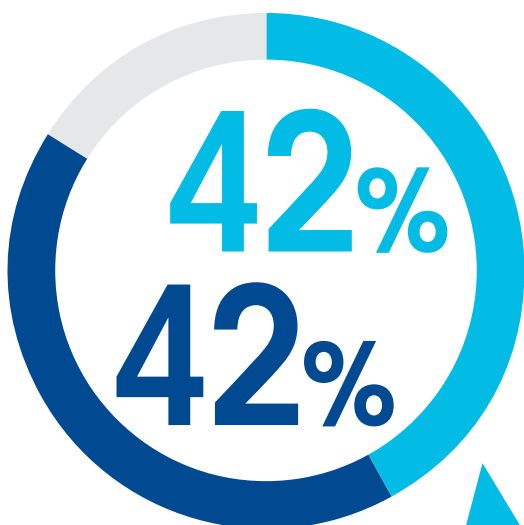
## Traditional Public & Independent School Educators



## Charter School Educators



school or district had surveyed the job satisfaction



not a valued part of the school community

voice was a valued part of the school community

Overall, 68 percent of you are satisfied or somewhat satisfied with your jobs. Charter school members were slightly more satisfied at 71 percent. However, when asked about compensation, 51 percent of charter school educators considered themselves somewhat fairly or very fairly compensated while 56 percent of traditional public and independent school educators felt the same.

When asked if your school or district had surveyed your job satisfaction, only 60 percent of respondents said yes. Fewer charter school educators said yes but the comments from all members overwhelmingly suggest that anonymity is a great concern and that even when a survey was given, you were less likely to respond or answer fully how you feel about certain issues.

There was an even split in responses when asked if your voice was a valued part of your school community. With 42 percent of respondents saying yes and 42 percent, no, we found comments provided further detail to this split. Many comments said, “sometimes,” “only on the small things,” and “top down culture.”

When asked what your primary fear is today as an educator, failing to be a great teacher was the number one response. This was followed closely by having a false accusation charged by a student, parent, principal, or other staff member. By being a member of AAE, you receive legal advice in your *Education Matters* publication that you should always review. In the event of a false accusation, you will have the support of your membership organization to help you navigate the process. You’ve taken the first step to help protect yourself against that concern. ■



**Rena Youngblood** is AAE’s senior director of charter school services, where she develops and oversees AAE’s partnerships with charter schools and charter school advocates.

# Top 5 Things AAE Member Leaders Do to Support YOU!

**M**ember leaders are the heart and soul of AAE in your building. They are happy to answer any questions and offer support. We invite you to consider stepping up and joining our leadership team. Contact [shanna@aaeteachers.org](mailto:shanna@aaeteachers.org) for additional information on member leader roles and responsibilities.

1. Leaders keep promotional materials on hand for interested colleagues. They are prepared to share information.
2. Leaders have flyers for the scholarship and grant program. Fall application deadline is October 1, 2019.
3. Leaders love opportunities to share their knowledge of AAE and know that colleagues' time is limited. They provide snacks and lunch for faculty meetings, staff lunches, breakfast, etc.
4. Leaders send an email to establish their role as a member leader and include an application, as well as details on how to turn them in for financial incentives.
5. Leaders like/share/follow our pages. This support lets others know about AAE! ■



**Shanna Morgason** is the national membership team senior director for the Association of American Educators and a regional membership director in Arkansas.



## Why Tracie Gipson Is a Member Leader

Teachers,

I would like to share my story of why I joined Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA) seven years ago, and why I'm an ASTA member leader.

I did not want to be a part of a partisan agenda but I wanted to be professionally represented for a great price as well as financially backed with a liability policy. As I looked into different organizations, I felt ASTA and its national organization Association of American Educators (AAE) would be the perfect fit for me. ASTA membership's low monthly cost includes \$2,000,000 in professional liability insurance, access to legal and professional services, scholarships and classroom grants, informational newsletters, and a supportive staff who will always listen to you. I truly want you to know this organization provides excellent services for a low cost but still maintains professionalism and all the opportunities that other organizations provide.

This is a wonderful organization.

Thank you,

Tracie Gipson, M. Ed.  
Fort Smith, Arkansas

## Legal Corner:

# Best Practices for Creating Your School Communication Policy

It is that time of year again. Bulletin boards are being decorated and classrooms are getting organized. Teachers have a massive amount of back-to-school work to do, but one of the most important tasks in preparing for a new school year is to establish and follow a policy of clear and direct communication. Even if you had a successful policy in place last school year, we recommend that you review your policy and your school's policy as part of your back-to-school "to-do" list.

Good communicators make good educators and good communication tools help protect you. Written communication can help insulate you from claims of unprofessionalism, inconsistent treatment of students, grading challenges, and more.

Here are some suggestions for establishing your own communication strategies for the upcoming year.

1. Clearly communicate student expectations in written form. Ideally, expectations are laid out in a welcome letter that is sent home to parents/guardians or given to students at the beginning of the year.

Not only should academic performance expectations be noted but conduct expectations should also be clearly delineated. Make sure your welcome letter is shared with your administration and approved before it is disseminated.

2. Communications with parents or guardians should be confined to school-approved mechanisms. Take the time to fully review and thoroughly understand your school's policy on communication with parents or guardians. You should do this every year because school communication policies can change.

3. We urge you to confirm verbal communications of significance by following up promptly in writing, regardless of who the conversation was with. This is particularly important if you are dealing with a challenging parent, a directive from administration, or a conflict with a colleague.

4. You should avoid communicating with parents using social media, blogs, and school websites. Even if your school allows it, you should avoid friending or

accepting friend requests from parents or students on any private social media account.

5. Unless your school has a tracking mechanism such as Groupcall or Remind where texts can be archived, limit your use of text messaging. If you rely heavily on this form of communication and there is no tracking mechanism or way to archive, forward all parent communications to an electronic file. Each student should have a file where communication with parents/guardians is maintained.

Good communication skills are fundamental to your success as a teacher and can directly affect student achievement. A good communication strategy can help protect you in instances of unfair or untrue allegations. Make sure a communications policy is at the top of your "must do" list this year.

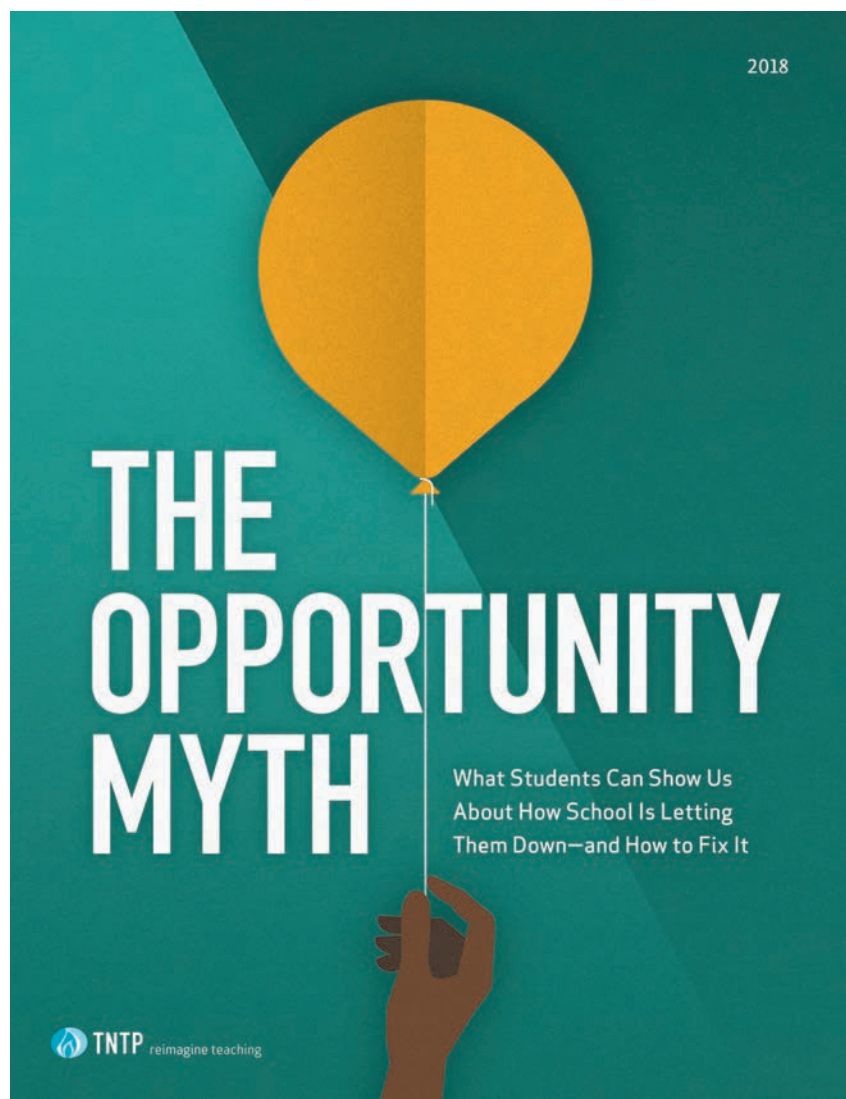
Legal Services would like to welcome you back to school. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us if you have any questions or concerns. ■



**Sharon Nelson** is the director of legal services for the Association of American Educators. In this capacity, Ms. Nelson oversees AAE's legal services team and works daily with

members and panel counsel to address members' legal concerns. A passionate advocate for educators, Ms. Nelson has been a lawyer focusing on employee rights issues for more than twenty years.

# The Opportunity Myth



“Far too many students graduate from high school still unprepared for the lives they want to lead.”

In fact, most students—and especially students of color, those from low-income families, those with mild-to-moderate disabilities, and English language learners—spent the vast majority of their school days missing out on four crucial resources: grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers with high expectations. Students spent more than 500 hours per school year on assignments that weren’t appropriate for their grade and with instruction that didn’t ask enough of them—the equivalent of six months of wasted class time in each core subject. Middle and high school students reported that their school experiences were engaging less than half the time. In classrooms with more access to these resources, students did better—particularly if they started the school year behind their peers.

This lack of access isn’t random. It’s the result of choices adults make at every level of our educational system. We’re asking all adults whose choices affect students’ experiences to commit to unraveling the opportunity myth. ■

*The full Opportunity Myth report is available on the TNTP website posted on September 25, 2018, <https://tntp.org/publications/view/student-experiences/the-opportunity-myth>*

**W**e’ve been telling students that doing well in school creates opportunities—that showing up, doing the work, and meeting teachers’ expectations will prepare them for their futures. Unfortunately, that’s a myth.

Far too many students graduate from high school still unprepared for the lives they want to lead. They enroll in college and land in remedial courses, or start jobs and

discover they’re missing skills they need. We wanted to understand why.

To do this, we followed nearly 4,000 students in five diverse school systems to learn more about their experiences. What we found was unnerving: classroom after classroom filled with A and B students whose big goals for their lives are slipping further away each day, unbeknownst to them and their families—not because they can’t master challenging material, but because they’re rarely given a real chance to try.



# AAE/NWPE Scholarship Helps Support Hernandez Fellow

The United States has always been a country of immigrants. People from all over the world bring with them their own customs and their own language. For those who come to this country as children, our schools play an important role in preparing them to participate fully in our society. English as a New Language (ENL) training is critical to supporting this growing student population. This is why AAE was proud to award Alexis Brown with a scholarship through our northwest chapter, Northwest Professional Educators (NWPE).

With the help of an NWPE scholarship, Ms. Brown was able to become an ENL Hernandez Fellow at the University of Notre Dame. The ENL Hernandez Fellowship helps Catholic school teachers and administrators deepen their expertise in the education of linguistically diverse populations. Ms. Brown is one such educator. She teaches at a racially and culturally diverse school, and many of her students speak another language at home. Of her students,

she says, “Even though the students speak English all day at school, there is still a language barrier. For example, math terms are challenging for many of my students.”

With her participation in the fellowship program, Ms. Brown will learn how to implement teaching strategies to support her English language learners, as well as how to value their culture and practice culturally inclusive pedagogy. Of the program, she says, “I think this program will greatly help our students by providing new and innovative techniques to keep them engaged in the classroom.”

More importantly, this new knowledge will not be confined within a single classroom. Ms. Brown is eager to share her new knowledge with her colleagues, noting, “It will be an amazing opportunity to have a teacher on staff with the skills and knowledge to address ENL issues with confidence.” Ms. Brown added, “I am honored to be a resource for my school community.” She reports that she has already committed to doing several presentations to help spread her newly acquired knowledge.

AAE is also honored to support excellent educators like Alexis Brown!

Our AAE Foundation National Teacher Scholarship and Classroom Grant program was created to award passionate educators with up to \$500. Recipients are chosen through a rigorous evaluation process that involves AAE members and staff. If you would like to apply for a scholarship or grant, our next deadline is October 1, 2019. Applicants in states with local

chapters should apply directly to that chapter’s competition.

We are also looking for current AAE members who want to participate in scoring applications. If you’re interested in this opportunity, please email [profdev@aaeteachers.org](mailto:profdev@aaeteachers.org). ■



**Melissa Pratt** is AAE’s professional programs senior manager. In that capacity, she creates and manages programs that help AAE’s members increase their professional capacity.

Her favorite part of the job is the funding that she is able to provide to teachers each year through AAE’s National Teacher Scholarship and Classroom Grant program.

## SCHOLARSHIP & GRANT APPLICATIONS DUE OCTOBER 1!

The AAE Foundation’s National Teacher Scholarship and Classroom Grant competition is held twice a year, in the fall and spring. Its purpose is to help teachers explore professional development opportunities and for classroom projects and materials. For more information, visit [aaeteachers.org/awards](http://aaeteachers.org/awards).



# Icebreakers and Other Ways to Make Connections with Your Students

**B**ack-to-school involves a great deal of preparation and contemplating your aspirations for the year. While you're busy prepping lesson plans, setting up your room, unloading boxes, attending team meetings, and no doubt making lots of lists, don't forget, just as you have goals for the school year, so do your students. These icebreakers and other activities are a great way to make important and lasting connections with your students and set the tone for the entire year.



## Write a Classroom Promise

Have the class work together to write a pledge, motto, or mission statement. Post the promise in the classroom and provide a copy to students. This activity can be adjusted in its sophistication for grades K–12.



## Set Goals

Give students time to create a goal for themselves to achieve in your class this year. Have them write it down and give it to you. Remind them of their goals now and again, and when they achieve one, give them a little reward (and allow them to set a new one). Break the ice by sharing a goal you've set for yourself.



## Classmate Bingo

Create a bingo card; however, instead of letters and numbers, put in traits of classmates. Have students place stickers and/or write the name of the classmate they feel fulfills the descriptor.



## Top Ten Lists

Have students write a top ten list of something that has to do with your class or coming back to school. Students can share with the class.



## Teacher Power Point

Create a Power Point presentation with all the information that students might want to know about you, such as your hometown, college, information about your family, your favorite food, hobbies, etc.



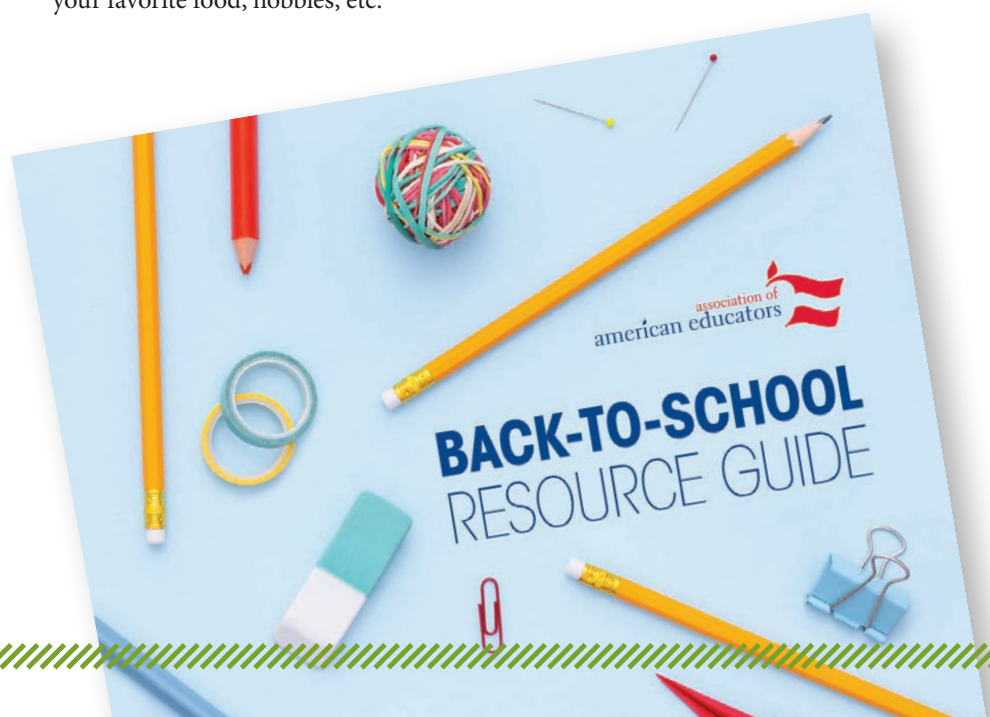
## Classroom Scavenger Hunt

Make a list of all the important places in your room that students should know about. Then create an activity to complete at each one. Turn these into a list to create a scavenger hunt that students can complete on the first day of school or with their parents on Back-to-School Night.



## Hang-out Time

Instead of doing something formal the first day, push all the desks to the side and create a hang-out space. Spend the first day of school just relaxing with your students, playing games, and trying to pull them into conversations with you. Provide snacks and pillows to make the atmosphere more welcoming.





## Paper Bags

In this activity, include a paper lunch bag in your beginning-of-year letter to your students. Ask them to put in the bag three things that represent themselves. Then, share these with the class on the first day of school.



## Classmate Interviews

Start the year off with a lesson. Review quickly what makes a good question. Then give students a chance to write down questions they have for their classmates. Break them into pairs to interview each other and then report back to the class.



## Letters from Last Year

Admittedly, this activity requires a bit of planning ahead. At the end of the school year, have your class write to the students that you will have next year and give them advice for the upcoming school year. Share these on the first day.



## Solve a Puzzle

Nothing will get students quite as engaged as moving right to the heart of the matter. Give your students a problem to solve on the first day. If you're a history teacher, this could be a simulation; if you're math, it could also be a simulation, or if you're science, it could be a lab activity (the egg experiment comes to mind). The key is that it needs to involve teamwork, problem-solving skills, and should be murky in its approach.

Want more ideas? Be sure to order your *AAE Back-To-School Resource Guide*. ■

# Abenity Discounts for Your Back-To-School Needs

Every day of the year, our members-only discount program lets you access more than 125,000 local and national discounts for your whole family. During the back-to-school time of year, you can really save on supplies, room set-up materials, even school lunches.



### Office Depot/Office Max:

15%–30% off in-store purchases at Office Depot on 100+ items plus print black & white copies for just 2.5 cents each, color copies for 29 cents each, and receive 40% off binding and finishing services from the Office Depot Print Shop.

**Target:** Save \$5 on purchases of \$50 or more.



**Shipt:** Get 1 month of free grocery delivery and \$10 credit. ■

## Stay in the AAE Loop!

Connect with us and—most importantly—with each other on your favorite social media site. Why?

- To receive up-to-the-minute news on education policy & reform
- To be the first to know about new AAE offers & announcements
- To be a part of a nationwide teacher support network



When AAE members like you join the conversation, everybody wins.

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# AAE Out and About

