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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Real Talk About Classroom Management* by Serena Pariser. Here, Pariser shares her secret to creating a purposeful seating chart based on students' academic abilities, learning disabilities, language barriers, and more, rather than simply separating the students that "shouldn't be together" and sprinkling the rest around, hoping for the best.

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## Create Purposeful Seating Charts

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A big part of classroom management is giving every student opportunities to succeed. Have you ever seen a class that is doing a word search? Do you ever wonder why they drop down to almost silent immediately? **It's because they all can do the task.** The problem is that the task is too easy. Often, misbehaviors occur because students are underchallenged or overchallenged without academic support. This is where the tool of a purposeful seating chart can and will help your classroom management and improve the academic abilities of the class. With a purposeful seating chart, even with a challenging curriculum, students will always be in close proximity to those who can help them.

My mentor taught me a strategy for making seating charts that changed my teaching career. Before I learned this strategy, I used to break up students who “shouldn't sit together” and then sprinkle the rest around and hope for the best. This isn't the way to go. Making a purposeful seating chart means you look at students' academic abilities, learning disabilities, language barriers, and then make a chart from there. **I suggest having a seating chart done by Day 3 of the first week of school.** The earlier the better, or students will start finding who they want to sit next to, and then you'll have an extra battle on your hands. On the first day, if you do a student-centered lesson, you'll have the opportunity to observe how the students interact with each other. You'll need these observations to make a purposeful seating chart.

## Tips for Preparing a Purposeful Seating Chart

**Step #1:** Acquire a list of students with IEPs in your class. You can usually find this on your attendance roster. It's helpful to have a description of the disability, but sometimes IEPs trickle in later in the school year. Work with what you have in the beginning of the school year.

**Step #2:** Find the list with the students who are English language learners (ELLs). Usually you can acquire this list from the speech pathologist at your school or the school counselor. It's easiest to get this information on your attendance roster, so check there first.

**Step #3:** Acquire a list of students identified as GATE (gifted and talented), often found on your attendance list.

The rest of your students should be in general education.

Draw out how you want to arrange the desks in your rooms. I recommend seating students in groups of four to six. Research suggests this is best for larger projects (Teaching & Learning Transformation Center, n.d.), and it will leave space in your classroom for movement. Situate the groups so students' backs are not toward the front of the room. You will be talking to the whole class many times, and you do not want students to constantly have to flip their chairs around to listen to you.

**Step #4:** Place your **students with IEPs first**. *Spread them out*. Some students may have preferential seating in their IEP, meaning they are legally mandated to sit in the front, back, or side depending on their needs.

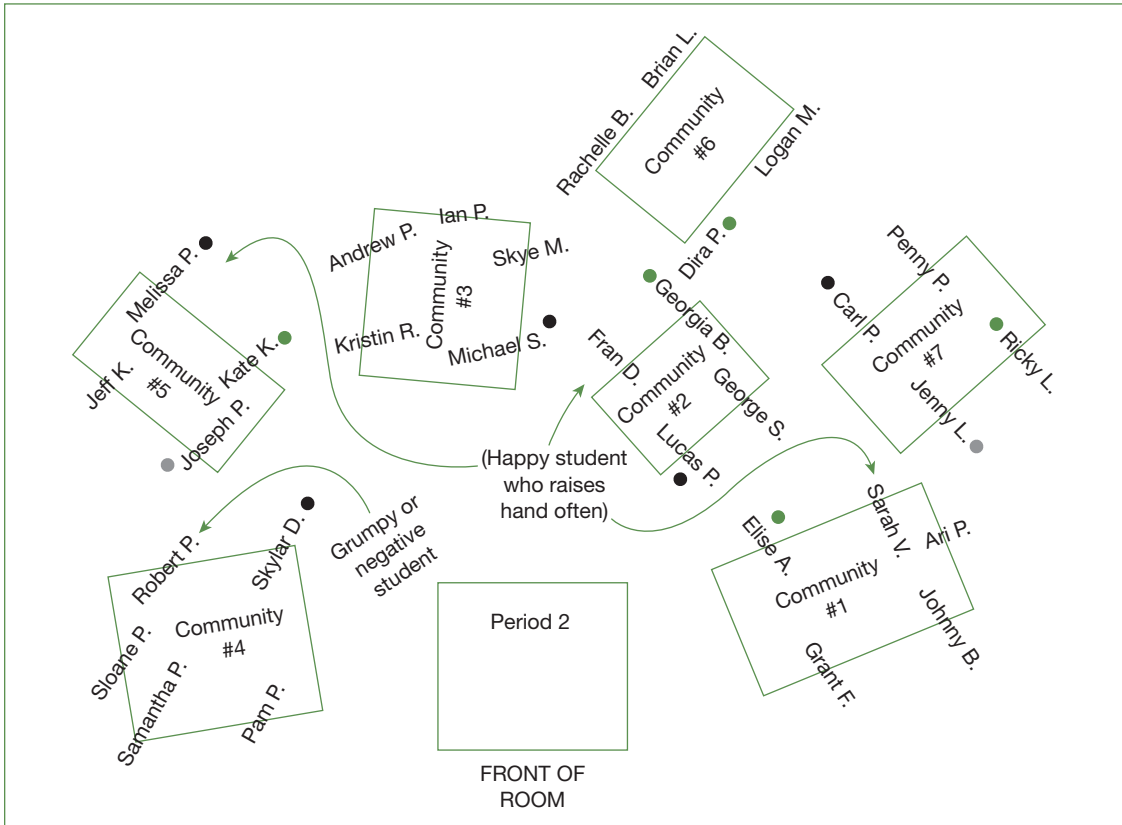
**Step #5:** *Spread out* your **students identified as ELLs**. I usually put these students next to vocal general education students who speak often in class. If the general education student speaks the ELL student's native language, even better. These students will usually be eager to help a struggling EL student when needed. This makes a difference. Spread out the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) students you may have, if you have that data.

**Step #6:** *Spread out* your **students identified as GATE**.

You don't want to have a seating chart with "IEP" and other words written all over it, but you want to be able identify these students when you are teaching. Perhaps use a different color highlighter to color their names, or put a dot by the names of students with IEPs, ELLs, and GATE students. This way, you can remember what types of learners you have in the class as you are teaching.

A carefully planned seating chart in a class might look something like this:

**Figure 5.1** A coded seating chart is most effective if it is always visible to the teacher. Dedicate a special place on your desk, or on your clipboard, where it is always in plain sight as you are teaching.



- student with IEP
- student identified as ELL (Keep in mind that advanced or early advanced ELLs may function quite similarly to general education students.)
- GATE student

You might want to put a code somewhere near your desk, but be careful about labeling student abilities right on the seating chart, as students will probably figure out who is who and feelings could be hurt. In addition, that is legally confidential information.

As you create your seating chart, you may also want to keep in mind these possible participants in your classroom:

**One-on-One Adults in Your Room:** If you have an adult who works one-on-one with a child, great! This student will be put in a group, and the adult will be in the group as another group member. It can be beneficial to put a “negative” student in this group, because the constant attention and proximity of another adult could turn a negative personality around, because this student won’t have to fight for attention. It’s worth a shot. I’ve seen it work. Just make sure the one-to-one adult and negative student aren’t a personal clash, and the negative student isn’t an explosive student. This isn’t fair to anyone. It’s a good idea to have a talk first with the other adult to let him know about the other students in the group, so he feels empowered to work with every student at their group.

**Happy Students:** I usually wait two days before making the seating chart to pick out the happy students who raise their hands often in the classroom. Happy students will reveal themselves fast, so usually I can spot them by Day 2. I try not to change seats after I make the seating chart on Day 3. I’ll stick one dead center in the front and one dead center in the back. This keeps the class happy. See Best Practice #6 for more details on seating happy students.

**Chronically Grumpy or Angry Students:** Sometimes there are students who seem to have permanent black clouds over their heads. I can usually tell who these students are in the first few days. They make sly comments, they may exhibit outwardly defiant behaviors before the others, or they may just sit with their arms crossed your entire period. We want happy and vocal students eager to learn to become role models for these students, not the other way around. When identifying these students, you are looking for one trait: negativity. Most of the time, these students can be identified as quickly as the happy students.

As much as I’d like to wave a magic wand and have a smile appear on their faces, it’s just not always possible. The fact is, the learning must go on. And we know that a grumpy or angry student doesn’t learn as much as a happy student. Chronically grumpy and angry students need the most help, but their negative attitude shouldn’t get most of your attention. If placed incorrectly, they may try to bring the class down with their negativity. With a properly made seating chart, we prevent this from happening. It’s important that they are placed strategically. I’ll usually set them on the side of the seating chart in front so they don’t get lost in the back of the room or create a peanut gallery, and so their negative energy doesn’t bleed into the class.

If you need to do a few seat swaps later, you can, the sooner the better, but make sure you still have the IEP, ELL, and GATE students evenly spread out among the general education students. In a perfect world, you wouldn’t do any

seat swaps, because consistency is the best in a classroom, but classrooms aren't always perfect and we're working with human beings. Most years I do one or two seat swaps in the first week and then leave the seating as is. The bottom line is that as teachers, we have to figure out a way to ensure that the whole class learns together. Once you make sure the learning of the class isn't hindered by a chronically grumpy or negative student, then you can go deeper into looking at the root causes of these emotions and help the student one on one.

**Vocal Students:** Make sure there's one vocal student at each community table. "Vocal" means a student that loves to share out. **I mark these students on my class roster Day 1 and 2 so I know to spread them out.** These are usually also the students who like to talk to their friends, too, and that's okay. Sometimes, the vocal students are the lowest-level ELL students, and I love when this happens. You want the student to be vocal (regardless of academic ability) because you want a focus of your class to be raising hands to answer and having a voice. It's fascinating how these students can encourage others to raise their hands as well. Use vocal students as resources to get strong participation from your classes. If each community group has someone raising a hand in the beginning, that will lead to others in the group following suit.

I then check the seating chart to make sure

1. Every low-level ELL is placed next to a general education student for academic support.
2. Two students with IEPs are not seated in the same group if possible.

This will give you a happy, mixed-ability class that has the most potential for success. Each student has a fighting chance to succeed. And—if you make a seating chart in the first week of class, you will learn student names much faster. It's a win-win.

In Figure 5.1, I placed the two hand-raising-happiest students in the center front and toward the center back, respectively, because **I want their energy to spread out to the class.** I then placed grumpy and/or angry students in Community #4. I now have a classroom where all students are given a chance to academically succeed. It's useful to keep this chart with you when you are teaching to check in on these students. If one table isn't grasping a concept, look at what learners you have at each table. Were three lower-level ELL students accidentally placed together? There are so many uses to having this type of seating chart. This is why my students don't choose their own seats.

There's a small chance that if you explain to anybody how you decided seats for your class, they may be offended because you're looking at cognitive abilities rather than other factors. But what you are actually doing is making the focus of your class academic success, collaboration, and engagement, and giving each student a chance to succeed based on the skills and knowledge they have. If you want to teach

challenging curriculum, include student collaboration regularly in your lessons, and ensure that students are able to perform academically; this way works.

## Changing It Up in High School

In high school, I have my students move their desks into different formations, depending on the learning plan that class period. Doing this once a week is usually enough to make this type of arrangement special, and it can really spice up a lesson. High school students can move desks around fast, so you need to have a bit more flexibility with changing the desks around to best fit the discussion needs of the lesson. The arrangement in your chart can be your “home base” arrangement.

In high school, depending on your discipline, you may want to rearrange seats in a way that fosters the **type of conversations** you have in the classroom.

- ▶ In a high school English classroom, if the space allows, a circle or horseshoe makes sense to have discussions about text in a seminar-type lesson.
- ▶ In a high school history class, a class divided down the center makes sense to debate two different sides of the story or historical event.
- ▶ In a high school math class, groups make sense to foster working collaboratively in teams to solve math problems.
- ▶ In a high school science class, groups make the most sense to complete labs.

In each of these seating arrangements, students of different cognitive levels should be spread out.

You could also use this type of dynamic seating style the second half of the year in an upper-grade middle school classroom. They may just need more help arranging the desks (maybe project a visual of what each shape looks like when you ask them to move the desks), and leave a few more minutes to get the desks back to their original positions at the end of the class.

## Changing It Up in Elementary and Middle School

If you’d like to try different formations in elementary and middle school, you can, but if you have any sort of behavior modification or rewards system with your community groups, it will be hard to reward groups the day you do a different seating arrangement. If you do not have a behavior modification system or classwide reward system with your groups, just make sure you don’t change the arrangement so often that students forget where their home base seats are. So, I’d do it sparingly in the middle school grades—perhaps maybe once per unit during a debate, Socratic seminar, or other special activity.

## Flexible Seating

Flexible seating means that students choose their own seats based on where they feel most comfortable and/or learn best. Also, in flexible seating, students often have unique seating arrangements such as bean bags, the carpeted floor, or swivel stools. Although flex seating has certain benefits and is often preferred by students, I don't recommend using this arrangement in your first years. Here are a few reasons why:

Something to keep in mind with this is that students are unaware of their classmates' special classifications (if any), meaning students do not know each other's ELL levels, or which students have IEPs or are classified as gifted and talented. Flexible seating should still provide students with opportunities for collaboration. It can disrupt a full-class behavior modification program based on groups or communities, because students maybe constantly changing their seats. Also, with flexible seating, self-chosen student groups will likely be academically uneven in skill level, compared to one another. I usually had classrooms with a high percentage of ELLs, as well as a high percentage of students with IEPs. Therefore I found that my seating chart worked best to scaffold instruction and create a positive learning environment, which is crucial to learning. My students needed to collaborate and needed to be grouped based on varying abilities to understand the material. When I allowed flexible seating, usually the students with low ELL levels grouped together, the students with high academic ability grouped together, and so on. Learners tend to naturally gravitate to people like them. Remember, students may be so excited to be able to have flexible seating that they agree to be more focused. However, we know that a quiet classroom does not always mean that students are learning the most or grappling with the material. Remember the word search example from the beginning of this section? It's a fine balance.

### Tips for Flexible Seating

If you are curious about trying flexible seating, I suggest you

1. Use the seating arrangement proposed in the tips at the beginning of this section as the students' home base or normal seating. The home base seats usually work best for instruction time.
2. Try it out in small bits: Perhaps try flexible seating mildly at first, meaning, if students are working in table groups, you could let the group choose where they want to sit in the room during work time. The groups should stay together. For example, during groupwork time, one group may go to the carpet together and sit in a circle if that works for them and they are more comfortable.



3. Use it at first with a class that needs less academic or language scaffolding, for example, a class with mostly GATE or general education students. The seating arrangement provided provides solid academic support. So, students who need less academic support might do better with flexible seating.
4. Have a lesson teaching students how to pick the seat best for them.
5. Try it out with just one class first.

## Tips for Making a Seating Chart

1. Print out a class roster before Day 1 of the school year.
2. During class, mark
  - a. happy, engaged students
  - b. grumpy, angry students
  - c. vocal studentsUse just one letter or codes so students can't interpret.
3. Keep an eye on the same students for Day 2. Are they marked accurately?
4. Before Day 3, print out your list of students with IEPs, ELL students, and GATE students. (This information usually can be found on your attendance list if you look closely.)
5. Arrange the desks the way you'd like first, before Day 3.
6. Draw a seating chart for each class. First, place your students with IEPs and those identified as ELLs based on where they will learn best. Next, place GATE students. Then, place your happy students definitely first, toward the center and then spread out evenly. Then, place your negative students on the side where they have room and aren't physically accidentally bumped often. These students usually like space.
7. Spread out the general education students in the remaining seats.
8. Color code your chart based on type of student so you have a reference during class to check for understanding. Be as discreet as possible when making the color code legend on the seating chart. Assume a student will see it at some point during the year, and shouldn't be able to understand the legend. This step is very important also if you have to switch students between seats (that usually happens); you can make sure they switch to where they will still balance out a table academically.

## Your turn

1. What are your thoughts on the heterogeneous seating chart and spreading out the students with IEPs, general education students, ELL students, et cetera?

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2. How would you do small group instruction in your room? Do you have a designated area?

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3. What are your thoughts on spreading out happy engaged students and also spreading out negative students? Do you think this has benefit to a classroom?

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4. Do you have another way you would like to do a seating chart? Talk to your coteacher or another colleague about this and gather some ideas. (Remember: If you want the focus of the class to be on academics and engagement, then you have to look at these criteria—that is, “the data”—first when arranging students.)

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## Real Conversation With Eighth-Grade Student

**Student:** Ms. Pariser, what do you call pasta that is not real?

**Me:** I don't know.

**Student:** An impasta!

**Me:** [laughs loudly]

**Student  
[to another  
student]:** See, that's how you know they are getting old,  
when they laugh at that.

**Student  
[to me]:** It was just a social experiment.