

Old rain boots can be recycled as innovative planters.



...DECORATE YOUR CLASSROOM

Get your class involved and watch the community feeling bloom.

By Jennifer Prescott

Recruit the best decorating corps you have for this year's classroom makeover—your students! Not only does involving kids save money and effort on your part, teachers agree that it increases kids' sense of involvement and respect. Try these 10 teacher-tested ideas for a classroom that shines with color and learning.

1 TRAIN OF RULES

Susan Stackhouse, a middle-school teacher in Warminster, Pennsylvania, takes photos of students

modeling quality behavior to accompany the rules they draft together. "When the children have ownership in this activity, they take more responsibility in living up to the rules," says Stackhouse. For a twist on her idea, have each child design a construction-paper train car; paste one photo showing great behavior on each car. Tape the cars together along a blank wall. Every time you see a child modeling great behavior, add a strip of construction paper "cargo" atop his or her car; each strip can count as 10 points toward a 50- or 100-point special reward.

2 POEMS AT YOUR FEET

Jane Hsu, a first-grade teacher in New York, New York, emphasizes poetry in her classroom—but it doesn't just appear on the walls. When a child writes a particularly compelling phrase, Hsu will cut the letters out by hand (for speed, you can use a die-cutting machine) and affix them to the floor with heavy, clear tape. Occasionally, she adds the words of well-known poets. As the children go through the day, they can't fail to glance down for a surprising turn of phrase or a quick inspiration. >>

10 ways to

3 RECYCLING WALL

Audrey Kennan, a third-grade teacher in Plainsboro, New Jersey, likes to “keep the prefabricated stuff to a minimum” when it comes to bulletin boards. “I want the students to feel invested in the classroom,” she says, “because they helped to create it.” Instead of cheery, anthropomorphic apples, try an eye-catching bulletin board that celebrates the unlikely: garbage. Have each child bring in a piece of reasonably clean trash: a glass jar, a mismatched sock, or an empty potato-chip bag. Use heavy-duty glue to attach each item to a bulletin board. Next to each object, have kids draw and write their ideas for how to use the item creatively, instead of consigning it to a landfill.

4 ROOM WITH A VIEW

Even if you’re stuck with a windowless basement room that once housed janitorial supplies, there’s no reason to despair. Get out the paint—with your principal’s permission. First, invite kids to sketch ideas on paper for fantastic scenes that they’d like to see outside a window. Then have them work in teams to paint those scenes, window frames and all. When they’re done, hang colorful, inexpensive curtains around the windows for a finished look.

5 FOAM-BOARD KIDS

Have kids make life-size cut-outs that can really stand up to a year’s worth of use. Have kids each lie down on a large sheet of foam board, while a partner traces carefully around them. Cut out the shapes and affix sturdy cardboard stands to the back so that each figure will stand on its own. Invite students to embellish their figures using craft supplies, yarn, buttons, and fabric scraps. Then arrange the figures around the room or put them in a public space as a special display.

6 WHERE IN THE WORLD?

To build social studies and geography skills, introduce a map theme at the beginning of the year. Have students design and build “street signs”

indicating various classroom areas; for example, “Reading Boulevard” and “The Math Manipulatives Corner Store.” Make other signs showing where the classroom lies in relation to major cities and sites. Invite kids to set up traffic patterns



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for the room and come up with creative ways to guide “drivers” as they navigate the space: stop signs, green lights, and roadways. Don’t forget to map out a spot for a city park where kids can read!

7 CEREAL BOX STORAGE

Why store student writing in dull, grey binders? Instead, have your students bring in empty cereal boxes. Provide acrylic paint, wallpaper scraps, glue, and fabric, and have kids fashion the cereal boxes after store-bought magazine holders. They can personalize each with a name, and then use the boxes to store writing projects.

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Vertical
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8 FINE ART GALLERY

Open up a student art gallery in your classroom, just as former Kindergarten teacher Rick Ellis did at the Dutch Neck School in Princeton Junction, New Jersey. Scour garage sales for decent frames (spray painting a dull frame with gilt paint can work wonders). Ask kids to suggest ideas for wall placement, mount the artwork, and have each child add a title and description of his or her masterpiece and the medium used to create it. Display the descriptions beneath each painting, and then invite visitors to stroll the gallery with kids as their tour guides.

9 SEEDS IN A SHOE

Creative planters on your classroom windowsill will give kids something to tend and care for, while lending your room color and life. Sneakers or rain boots that they've outgrown (or you've outworn) make fun, colorful planters. Pound a few holes in the bottom of the boot with a nail, then have students pour a thin layer of gravel in the bottom of the boot for drainage. Fill with potting soil and transplant flowers or seedlings from science experiments that have run their course.

10 SPACE CASE

For a big splash, build your entire classroom décor for the year around a single theme. For a Mars Space Station, for example, collect junk-mail CDs and pin them to the wall (shiny side out) to represent a galaxy of planets. Have kids add homemade asteroids, moons, and rings. A computer desk can become a NASA-worthy workstation with the addition of some large Lego "buttons" and some old TV rabbit ears. Students can write their wishes and dreams for the year on star- or comet-shaped mobiles. Finally, a reading corner could feature space-themed informational and fantasy books, housed inside a cardboard box designed to look like a rocket. The sky is the limit! □

JENNIFER PRESCOTT'S LAST ARTICLE FOR *INSTRUCTOR* WAS "MUSIC IN THE CLASSROOM: A USER'S GUIDE FOR EVERY TEACHER" (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2005).

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