

# TOO MUCH STUFF?

Simple organizing solutions for even the *messiest* classroom.

By Hannah Trierweiler

**Y**ou've got boxes filled with glue sticks. And 32 calculators. And apple juice and Band-Aids and that gallon of blue glitter you *know* will come in handy someday. Ack. It's all stuff you need, but when you're getting ready for the new year, you just wish you could hire a professional organizer to take care of it all for you.

Well, we found one in Donna Smallin, organizational expert and author of *The One-Minute Organizer, Plain & Simple*. Here are just a few of her tips on getting organized, and uncluttered.

## CLUTTER CRISIS: YOU'RE OVERWHELMED

The colorful classroom you left in May seems like a disorganized disaster now that it's August. Your library looks like a rummage sale, your art center is overflowing with paintbrushes and tissue paper from an ancient craft project, and you can't see one inch of wall underneath all your posters and charts. You don't even know where to begin.

## SIMPLE SOLUTION: START SMALL

"Choose just one space to organize at a time," suggests Smallin (such as your science center or reading corner). "Then



close your eyes and visualize what that space might look like without clutter and how that would make you feel."

Next look at what's *already* working. "If you've been successful organizing one particular area, think about how you can apply that process elsewhere," says Smallin. Love your clothespin attendance chart? Maybe you can use the same system to keep track of what groups kids are in, or what centers they are using.

## CLUTTER CRISIS: YOU KEEP EVERYTHING

Your paper-towel tube collection is threatening to take over your supply closet, and there's no more room on your bulletin boards with all the notes and projects from former students. It's tough for you to toss something your future students might need, or anything special from a student you once taught.

## SIMPLE SOLUTION: TRY THE MOVING TEST

Smallin recommends pretending that you are moving classrooms (even if you're not). "Ask yourself: Is this item

worth the effort of packing up and unpacking at the new place? If not, give it a new home," she says. (A new teacher's classroom might be just the place.)

For those paper-towel tubes, there's another test: "If you are saving something because you *might* need it someday, ask yourself 'Could I get another one easily and inexpensively if I needed it?' If the answer is yes, let it go."

When it comes to sentimental items (like crayoned-in portraits and homemade holiday decorations), Smallin has clients take photos, store them in an album, and then part with the original.

## CLUTTER CRISIS: YOU'RE BURIED BY PAPER

It's the first week, and already you have piles of paperwork accumulating on your desk—school policies, invitations, IEP requests, field trip forms, and more. You need a filing system, stat (preferably one that won't eat up all that crucial lesson-planning time). >>>

# your classroom

## **SIMPLE SOLUTION: TURN PILES INTO FILES**

The first step? “Take a sample pile and make a list of the types of papers you find. This will help you figure out what files to create,” says Smallin (your categories might include “Policies,” “Student Records,” “Permission Slips,” etc.).

When you’re ready to make the files, keep in mind a secret that’ll make taking in new students much easier: “Align file tabs in the same position on every folder. That way you can add and subtract folders without messing up a zigzag pattern.”

Finally, prevent future pileups by deciding what to do with each piece of paper as it comes in. Set up folders for filing: “Take Home,” “Photocopy for Parents,” “Return to Main Office”—but know when to toss it. The goal is to touch each paper just once, explains Smallin.

## **CLUTTER CRISIS: YOU STOCKED UP AT THE DOLLAR STORE THIS SUMMER**

You love the new watercolor sets you

snagged at a bargain, but in between your pastels and paint, there’s just no room for them in your art center. You have nowhere to put your new treasures.

## **SIMPLE SOLUTION: THINK ONE IN/ONE OUT**

Live by Smallin’s rule that “for every item you bring in the front door, send one item out the back door.” It may sound harsh, but chances are you have some dried-out markers taking up space anyway. Classrooms are small spaces that unfortunately can’t accommodate years of bargain-hunting!

## **CLUTTER CRISIS: YOUR KIDS DON’T GET YOUR “CLUTTER-FREE” MISSION**

After the first few days of school, the organizational systems you so lovingly created are in chaos—there are calculators in the reading area, picture books in the math area, pencils in with the markers, and paper just about *everywhere*.

Your students need a wake-up call to their responsibility for helping to keep

the classroom organized and clean.

## **SIMPLE SOLUTION: PLAY CLUTTER TAG**

Smallin offers parents a simple game that can easily be adapted to the classroom: Just give a sheet of stickers to each child and ask students to place one on any item that’s out of place. “Making them aware of their clutter trails may make them think twice about leaving things around,” she says.

## **CLUTTER CRISIS: YOUR COMPUTER’S CLOGGED TO THE MAX**

Forget your classroom—it’s your virtual world that’s a mess! Administrators e-mail you at least twice a day about new policies and back-to-school functions, colleagues swamp you with articles they think you might enjoy, and let’s not forget the dozen messages from a certain Mrs. X “just checking in” about her kindergartener’s progress in reading since he started school (a week ago!).

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# 1/2 Horizontal Left

## 2/3 Vertical Left

## your classroom

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### **SIMPLE SOLUTION: FILE OR TOSS EVERY MESSAGE THAT COMES IN**

Delete all e-mail that requires no further action on your part. If you must save an e-mail (such as Mrs. X's should you need to show your principal), create a folder for it on your hard drive. The key is to "set up electronic folders the same way you would set up physical folders," says Smallin. Use subfolders within folders to organize files.

### **CLUTTER CRISIS: YOU'RE OVERBOOKED**

You remember leaving the chess club permission forms under your swim team binder, but you can't find them—and you're 15 minutes late to your teacher book club. While there are no extracurricular activities in your job description, there are way too many on your plate.

### **SIMPLE SOLUTION: PUT YOURSELF ON A "COMMITMENTS DIET"**

"If you are involved in activities that are not aligned with your values or priorities, consider resigning from those activities," says Smallin. "It's okay. People will understand. Keep in mind that in stepping aside, you are giving someone else an opportunity to step forward."

Trouble saying no? Try saying "Can I get back to you?" "You may find it easier to bow out when you don't have the pressure of giving an immediate reply."

### **CLUTTER CRISIS: YOUR TO-DO LIST IS WHAT'S CLUTTERED**

It's the week before school and your to-do list is in overdrive. There are files to read, photocopies to make, and lessons to plan! You feel overwhelmed just looking at what's ahead.

### **SIMPLE SOLUTION: PRIORITIZE 20%**

While everyone's to-do list is different, the expert advice is to prioritize 20 percent. In other words, if you have 10 items on your list, start by doing the most important two, and go from there.

But "remember that your to-do list is not nearly as important as your to-be list," says Smallin. "Schedule time to be with the people you love, in the places you love, doing the things you love to do." □