

EDUCATION WEEK

## SPOTLIGHT



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# TIPS FOR NEW TEACHERS

**Editor's Note:** The first year of a new teacher's career is always challenging. This Spotlight provides insight and practical suggestions for getting started on the right foot.

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Published August 4, 2014, in *Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# A Survival Guide for New Teachers

By Brett Bohstedt

It's here: your first year of teaching. Have you developed a touch of insomnia thinking about it? Are you pining for a guiding light to lead the way? Are you wondering what teaching is really like?

Here's a quick glimpse:

Day one. Students take their seats. Most kids know each other from the previous year; that makes you the new kid on the block.

Students capitalize on this and decide to mess with you. While you take attendance, Mark decides to switch names and call himself Alonso—but there is no Alonso on your roster. The other students start to snicker, seeing your uncertainty as you frantically search your list, wondering why this glitch has happened. Maybe you missed something?

By now, the whole class has decided that today—your first day as a teacher—they are not going to take you seriously. You've failed to establish control, and you'll never get it back.

Ok, you can stop panicking—I made this up. It's not likely to happen. But in teaching, you'll quickly learn that nearly anything is possible. And you've got to figure out a way to survive. Here's my guide to surviving the first year of teaching.

**1. Be realistic about your goals.** If you've come to teaching to change the world, prepare for a prompt fall from grace. Don't get me wrong, it's a great goal. But that kind of thinking will frustrate you and cause potentially irreversible stress leading you straight to no-man's-land — otherwise known as Burnout-ville.

Instead, set small, measurable goals for your classroom and practice. Avoid planning that elusive “perfect lesson.” Hone your skills on specifics: using sentence frames, providing background and context, closing your lesson, and making student learning mandatory. Give yourself clear guidelines for gauging whether a lesson was successful.

These small skills are actually the arrows that fill your teaching quiver. Think, “I want to get better at \_\_\_” and be concrete about filling in that blank. Ask colleagues and coaches about specific skills they value, and research those keywords (YouTube is a goldmine). Better yet, watch a veteran or talented teacher in the act, marking down what skills you'd like to adopt. Doing this chips away at

the monumental task of teaching and will reduce the stress that accompanies it.

Instead of wondering, “Am I an effective teacher?” rely on the skills you build and the results they produce. The key to getting better is resiliency—how well you bounce back from missing the target. Deliberately build your resiliency with Google's mindfulness program Search Inside Yourself.

**2. Find a way to manage stress.** You may already have stress-reducing techniques you use. But it's important to keep non-teaching hobbies at the forefront during the school year in order to avoid burnout.

Teachers work in a unique field that requires unique self-care. You are surrounded by people vying for your attention at a rate you've never experienced before. Seek activities that require some solitude, such as: mindfulness meditation, a weekend walk at the park, coffee at your local coffee shop, or drawing in a sketch book and getting creative.

Whatever you do, you must maintain a non-teacher life. It will give you the mental clarity to return to your students refreshed and ready to give your all—a requisite for every teacher.

**3. Avoid venting too much.** The American education system isn't perfect. You're here because of your passion, which means you might have charged emotions and opinions. And because our system isn't perfect, there is room for complaining. But be warned—using these endless conundrums as fuel for your conversations will take your focus away from the things that you have the power to change.

Instead, tread your teacher path by asking questions, seeking solutions, and telling positive, intriguing, and funny stories.

**4. “We're all failures.”** I use this quote to kick off every school year. Most students laugh when they hear it; some are bewildered. But I mean it. Failure must be looked at through a different lens in order to get any use out of it.

This notion of reclaiming failure is meant to brand it with a new face, one that reflects what failing actually looks like: trying. To teach is an art. This means you have to take it apart, mess around a lot, and come up with what is a modest attempt at a final product.

Keep in mind that the only worthwhile verb in teaching is do. Go into your first year expecting not to get things right. This al-

lows you to look at teaching, lesson planning, and even the art of learning from a broad perspective—otherwise known as a growth mindset.

C.S. Lewis wisely said, “Failures are finger posts on the road to achievement.”

In teaching, it's essential to view failure not as part of the process, but the process. It's very easy to convince yourself that you're an expert right away, or that you have to know every answer to every question.

Throw those ideas away. They will not serve you.

Embrace your naiveté. You are a learner, like your students. You're in this together. But you are the master learner. When students approach you with questions, embody Socrates and pose one right back. This will show students that it's OK to ask questions and be unclear. In fact, throwing yourself into the unknown is at the heart of learning. This process will make you take risks and will rub off on your students to do the same.

**5. Learn to let go.** Taking a new perspective when something doesn't go as planned is another concrete skill that will help you fail with grace. One way to help you let go of your failures is to write them down.

Keep a journal. Describe what didn't go as planned. Whether it's how you made an assessment, communicated a point, or dealt with a tricky situation, let no failure go unmarked. Then find a way to do it differently next time.

I recommend this same process for the things that worked well. Just keep in mind: Like changing winds, good ideas are momentary. Be flexible and innovative with your pedagogical practices. Avoid getting too comfy with how you do things. As William Faulkner said, “In writing, you must kill your darlings.” In teaching, it's indispensable to maintain a lukewarm fondness for your ideas.

This year, amongst all the uncertainty, please be assured that you are helping. You won't always see how, and you will wonder if you truly are, but know that your efforts mean seeds are being planted. Take comfort in this idea—it will help you survive and flourish through your toughest times.

*Brett Bohstedt teaches fourth grade in Yuma, Arizona. He enjoys writing articles for other teachers and aspires to be a literacy coach and head of the Writing Committee at his school. He is a member of the CTQ Collaboratory.*

Published July 28, 2008, in *Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# Five Tips for the New Teacher

By Cindi Rigsbee

*As the average birth year of our school faculty begins to dip below the year I began teaching, it becomes apparent that I am what some would consider an “experienced teacher.” That and my tendency to repeat myself. It occurred to me not long ago that there are expressions I use over and over when giving advice to beginning teachers. Here, in no particular order, are some possibly useful maxims from Ms. Rigsbee’s Guide to the Teaching Life.*

### 1. Hit the floor running and breathe when you leave.

I have always been one of the first teachers to pull into the parking lot in the mornings. Getting to work a good 20 to 30 minutes before the “official” start time is necessary for me. First of all, it gives me time to think quietly about my day. Also, it alleviates the problem of standing in line at a copy machine (or finding a jammed copy machine that was left blinking wildly by a teacher who didn’t attempt to fix it). After the copies are made, the agenda and goals are on the board, and the room is ready, there’s time for nice adult conversations (there may not be another opportunity until after school) and opportunities for relationship building as students arrive.

I understand there are “circumstances.” The year my chronically oversleeping son was a senior in high school, I had to fly into the school parking lot on two wheels every morning just as the second hand on the office clock was announcing I was late. So I do know it may be difficult to arrive as dawn breaks. But the earlier the better, so you can begin the day relaxed and ready.

Relaxed and ready is also the way to end the school day. I tell beginning teachers to beware of the 3:30 Club. Never get between them and the door at 3:30 (or whatever time school is out for you). I prefer to take my time in the afternoons, look over some lesson plans, straighten up my classroom from the day’s activities, and get ready for tomorrow. Also, I like to wander around the school to see what my students are up to. There’s nothing better than grading a few papers outside on the bleachers on a warm fall afternoon during football practice. My students, who should be paying attention to their coaches, always

wave wildly when they see me (like they didn’t just see me in class 30 minutes before).

The “breathe when you leave” part? That means teachers need to take care of themselves and relax during their hours out of school. This doesn’t mean they can’t grade the occasional paper or do schoolwork. For me, it’s very relaxing to do my lesson plans on Sunday afternoons, turn on some professional football and plan the week. But this routine may not work for some teachers. I tell new teachers to figure out what works for them, but to make sure to breathe.

### 2. Always remember, the show must go on.

I have always said teaching is a performance. Standing in front of (or facilitating around) a classroom of kids of any age requires energy and enthusiasm. We don’t work behind a computer screen at a desk all day, so we can’t just slump in our seats if we feel like it. There have been many days in my career when I have looked at the clock to see that it was time for my next group to come to me. “I can’t do it,” I would think. But I would take a deep breath, put a smile on my face (it’s OK if it’s fake at first), and start slapping some fives when those kids entered the room. Pretty soon their energy level would match mine, my smile would be real, and we would take it from there. The idea is to prepare ourselves for the “audience” and be the best we can be when we’re with them. Our students deserve no less.

### 3. Put on your cheerleading uniform.

Yes, we have to encourage and inspire. We know that. Some of our students come to us from dismal situations. I often wonder how some of them can even put one foot in front of the other to get to the bus stop. But they do, and while they’re with me, I’m going to do what I can to make their school day the best it can be.

But I’m not only talking about students. We need to cheer each other on, too. Schools can be toxic places. The job is stressful, and hopefully we aren’t complaining to kids all day. So when teachers get together, there can be some “venting.” That’s when I put on my metaphorical cheerleading uniform and go at

it. Don’t worry—I don’t act like Little Mary Sunshine. I do understand, and many times agree with, the complaints that are discussed in team rooms and school hallways. But I do try to put a positive spin on things if I can.

Also, I feel strongly that it’s important to be cheerleaders for our profession. I am weary from hearing “if you can’t do ... teach” and other misrepresentations of what we do every day. We have to market ourselves as the professionals we are. Some folks have the idea that teachers are still Charlie Brown’s wawa-wa-ing lecturers, whacking kids with yard sticks if they misbehave. But we know real teachers are committed professionals who believe in purposeful instruction and who have our students’ best interests at heart. As we speak to others, in the grocery store or by the neighborhood pool, we must embody that professionalism—not fuel the negative fires that surround so many schools.

### 4. If you make them the enemy, you will lose.

The rest of this expression goes like this: *There are more of them, and they have an audience.* As a middle school teacher, this is one saying that I share with teachers often. Teaching cannot be an “us” and “them” situation. In the community of a school, we are all family, and when the students know this (and *feel* this), they are much more likely to cooperate, be pleasant, and learn.

If, instead, they are aware of the animosity a teacher feels toward them, they will push back, and it probably won’t be pretty. Being in this school thing together is much more productive and much less stressful. A student on your side can be the difference between loving your job and dreading getting up in the morning. Do what needs to be done to ensure they’re on your side—and it’s mostly about being on theirs.

### 5. Don’t hide your light under a bushel.

I can’t take credit for this one. I believe it was mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount. It was also mentioned by my Mama about once a week as I was growing up. Basically, it means “don’t hide your talent.” I share this one with new teachers as I encourage them to

use their talents, even some that aren't so obvious, to make their teaching experience more enjoyable.

For example, I love to write poetry. I'm not a published poet, but I don't need to be. I have a captive audience every day. By sharing my poetry and bits of my personal life, I'm able to connect to my students in a way that may be difficult otherwise. Some teachers use their athletic talents to inspire students; I've worked with two Ultimate Frisbee playing teachers (in two different schools) who have taught their students these skills while at the same time teaching teamwork and perseverance. One of my dearest teacher friends teaches math and clogging at the same time. (And if you don't know what clogging is, check it out on YouTube!)

Another way I hope new teachers will shine their lights is by marketing themselves as professionals. Each parent who has a child sitting in a classroom should know the credentials that got that teacher there—college degrees, honors and awards received, types of experiences (not necessarily years of experience but types—has the teacher worked with different grade levels before or taught other subjects?). I believe teachers should have a pamphlet ready to hand to classroom visitors that includes all of your career highlights.

There are a few other expressions I throw out now and then. For example, "He is the boss of you" is one I use when teachers are complaining about the principal's expectations. But that's a story for another day. For now, I'll just look back over the years I've been teaching and wonder when I stopped asking so many questions and somehow got so old that I started answering a few.

*Cindi Rigsbee is a National Board-certified reading teacher at Gravelly Hill Middle School in Orange County, North Carolina. She was recently selected as North Carolina's State Teacher of the Year for 2008.*

*Published September 17, 2008, in Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# What Kids Wish Teachers Knew

By Laurie Wasserman

I was in our building a few weeks before school began, setting my room up for the new year. My friend and colleague was doing the same in her room, accompanied by her daughter Talia, now a high school sophomore, who enjoys helping Mom get ready for her new students.

Talia looked on as we freshened up our classrooms and began to reflect on her own middle school memories. We soon sat down for a spontaneous chat, and I asked her to talk from a student's perspective about what middle school had been like for her. With those years still fresh in her memory, Talia offered some candid insights from the other side of the teacher's desk.

Talia adored her 8th grade U.S. history teacher, who engaged each of his classes in creating a classroom constitution during the first weeks of school. They wrote laws that needed to be followed and created ways to amend them as needed. Talia talked of his dedication to making learning fun and interesting by creating hands-on learning opportunities. Then she shared some other stories—about the foreign language teacher who put so much effort into her lessons, demonstrating a deep dedication to her subject, and the memorable science teacher who set up intriguing labs and projects that made Talia eager to come to school each day.

She also related sad stories about other teachers who often showed up late for class, or made cutting remarks about students' intelligence and abilities. She poignantly recalled how such comments hurt her fellow classmates and lingered long after the teacher's thoughtless outbursts.

As we continued our chat, I asked Talia to tell me what she wished teachers would know about their students. Here are some of her pointers:

**"Tell your stories about when you were our age."** Talia explained that when teachers share their own middle school stories—including some of their blunders or embarrassing moments—it makes them more human. Her mother, my colleague, told us she did this in her own classroom because she realized how much it meant to her students to hear about her own mistakes as a kid.

**"Teachers underestimate what kids can do, and what they know."** Often, Talia explained, teachers assume kids can't tell if a teacher is unprepared for class. But of course they can. Students also appreciate good teaching, exciting lessons, test review games, and activities. Years later, the kids remember which teachers lacked respect for themselves or their students. They remember the sarcastic comments, as well as the kind and caring ones.

**"We love to see our work hung up on the board."** Talia shared how much it meant to come into a classroom and see her diligent efforts and those of her classmates prominently displayed. It meant the teacher was proud of you and willing to take the time to show off your hard work.

**"Read aloud to us. You're never too old to be read aloud to."** Simply put, it strengthens the bond between teacher and students. It's a gift from the teacher that students recognize.

**"Get us out from behind our desks."** Kids this age need to move around, and they love it when you've taken the time to plan opportunities for movement into your lessons. "We need to get physical," Talia is saying. "It keeps us learning."

**"You have to want to be around people, otherwise you make us miserable."** The kids know whether you're a "people person" and enjoy the company of kids. And sadly, they know if you aren't. Talia told us stories of some of her "hands off, impersonal teachers," as well as the warm, friendly teachers that made a difference. They will always be remembered.

The next time you enter your empty classroom, sit in a student's seat for awhile and think back to your own middle school days, when you too were an eager but uncertain adolescent learner. It's a whole different world out there, on the other side of the teacher's desk.

*Laurie Wasserman is a special needs teacher in Medford, Massachusetts. A 28-year veteran, she is National Board-certified in learning disabilities and writes frequently for Education World and other publications.*

Published August 5, 2008, in *Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# The First Days of School

By Jane Fung

*You've earned your first teaching job. Congratulations! Now what do you do? As I anticipate my 22nd opening day of school in California, I think back to my first years of teaching and all those things I wish I had known then that I know now. To help make your life as a new teacher a little easier these first few months of school, I've interviewed some of my friends (colleagues, mentees, and former student teachers) and collected a few helpful hints.*

### I will begin my first teaching assignment very soon. Any quick pointers?

No matter where or what you teach, there are some common things you can do to make your first weeks and months in the classroom a little easier. Here are just a few of them:

**Find a Friend** – Don't work alone in your classroom. Go out and meet other teachers and staff. They are your best resource for getting to know your school. Find a mentor! There will always be teachers who are willing to open up their classrooms, time, and expertise to help. Be open to working within and outside of your grade-level. Collaborating with others will not only help you develop as an educator, but your students will benefit from the experience as well.

**Take a Tour** – Get to know your school's physical layout. Walk around with a colleague or explore on your own. Find the bathrooms (adults and students) and how to access them. Will you need a key? Where are the nurse, resource teacher, office manager, cafeteria, and plant manager located? Where are the different grade levels located? Where do students play during recess? (I hope you have recess.)

**Planning & Schedules** – Ask other teachers at your grade-level what they usually do for the first week. Plan time and activities during the first days for students to

get to know each other and you. Overplan! It is much easier to have more planned and not get to everything than not to have enough. Create a general schedule for the first days of school. You can always adjust times accordingly when needed later on.

**Procedures** – Have a plan for classroom procedures. Will students sharpen pencils as needed? When can they use the bathroom? Are cell phones allowed? Where are materials kept? (More tips below.)

**Classroom Management & Expectations** – Know your discipline/classroom management strategies. Take time to think about what is and is not acceptable in your classroom. What kinds of things are NOT okay? How are you going to handle them? Think about what kind of learning environment you would like to create for and with students. Work as a class to set expectations for behavior and work habits. Chart, model, practice, and reinforce behavior expectations. Keep it simple—having a long list of rules may be difficult to monitor and enforce. Some of my primary school favorites are: Be Nice, Be Responsible, and Be Safe.

**Take Notes** – Have a place where you can jot down observations quickly throughout the day. Informal observations early in the year can be helpful further down the road if you have a student who may have a special need or is displaying behavior that continues to disrupt the class. Date each observation.

**Know Your Students** – Before school starts, find out who your students are. Do any of them have special needs and/or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that you should be aware of? What level of English development are the English Learners in the class? Do you have students that are identified as gifted and talented? Having more information about your students will help you better plan for their needs.

**Take Time to Celebrate** – Teaching is not easy, but it can be extremely rewarding. Sometimes we forget to celebrate the small accomplishments that take place every day in our class. Take time each day to recognize something positive. Share it with a friend, loved one, or colleague.

### What school procedures should I know before the start of the school year?

Here are some basic things to know before students arrive (or as shortly thereafter as possible!):

- How to take attendance and (if it's not all computerized) where to send attendance cards.
- Where to sign in and out each day.
- Official reporting hours.
- How to arrange for a sub when ill.
- What is the general bell schedule for recess, lunch, and dismissal?
- How do students purchase a lunch, and where do they eat?
- What if a student becomes ill or gets hurt in class?
- Where do students play at recess/lunch?
- Where (depending on grade level) do I pick up my students?
- Where do I dismiss students at the end of the day?
- In case of an emergency (or fire drill), what do I do?
- How do I contact the office if there is an emergency?
- How often will my class be cleaned?
- Procedures for ordering class materials and what is available.
- Where do I check out playground and/or PE equipment?
- Will I have a mentor?

### I just got the keys to my classroom. Now what?

Getting your first set of keys to the classroom is like getting keys to your first car or home. You are filled with excitement, but a little nervous at the same time. First step, find your classroom! Once you figure out how to unlock the door, step inside and just sit down. Words of caution, all classrooms are not the same. I have walked into a brand new, clean, empty classroom waiting to be moved into; and also dirty classrooms filled with unwanted materials left by the previous occupant. Whatever the condition, this is your classroom now. With luck, it will be home for at least the next school year, so make it yours.

It's a good idea to survey the furniture

and equipment in the room. Do you have enough chairs and tables/desks for students? Is there a place to store your materials? Are the computers working? Where is the projector, CD player, and screen? Start a list of things that are missing or needed. You may not get that kidney-shaped table or extra teacher chair, but it can't hurt to ask.

Now comes the fun part, arranging the tables and chairs. Sometimes you have a picture in your mind of how you want the desks arranged — and other times you may not know where to begin. If you need ideas, take a peek inside other teachers' classrooms. Talk to them about why the room is arranged that way and think about your own ideas for the classroom. Visualize where you may be teaching in the room and make sure all students will be able to see. Think about traffic flow; will there be enough room for students to move within the classroom without bumping into each other?

Some teachers can set up a room and leave it the entire year, but I am not one of them. If the class set-up does not work for students once they get there, I change it until it does. It's your room; play with it until it works for you and your students.

**One final tip for now:** I'd be surprised to learn that there is a new teacher in America who hasn't come across Harry and Rosemary Wong's invaluable book, "The First Days of School." But you may be less familiar with their eight-year series of advice columns, many of which are also aimed at the needs of novice teachers. Check them out at <http://teachers.net/wong/JUN08>!

*Jane Fung is a kindergarten teacher and new-teacher mentor at Alexander Science Center School in Los Angeles, California. A 2002 winner of the Milken Educator Award, she is a National Board-certified teacher and a member of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.*

*Published December 3, 2008, in Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# Taming the Dragon of Classroom Chaos

By Cossondra George

My classroom is not neat and tidy like some. It has that homey, lived-in, much-loved look. The tables are never quite in straight lines, the computer cords are twisted and tangled, and my teacher desk looks like a recycling center exploded on top of it.

When you are inherently disorganized, life's simplest tasks can be overwhelming. I am a person who, left to my own devices, would simply suffocate under the piles of stuff that accumulate around me. Fortunately, I am not ashamed to admit this character flaw, and I search for tools and tricks that will help me exorcise the mighty dragon of classroom chaos—or at least force him to stay in his cave.

Over the years I have collected ideas from many teachers I have met in real and virtual spaces. While some of these strategies work well for them but not for me, others suit my teacher personality. I've managed to piece together enough tools to keep my classroom running fairly smoothly.

*Here are my top 10 "stolen" organization secrets. They're really only borrowed, and you're welcome to borrow any that might work for you.*

**1. Have specific places for students to turn in work.** I use plastic stackable baskets with bold clear labels for each class period. This stops students from tossing a paper onto my desk and having it sucked into the black hole, never to be seen again.

**2. Have a designated place for absent students to collect their work when they return to school.** The last thing I do each day before leaving school is take care of work for absentees. I look at my attendance book and identify each student who was not present in each class period. I put exactly what we did that day—with any homework and handouts—in a basket marked both with ABSENT WORK and the particular class period. This puts the primary responsibility on the student, who knows my expectation that he or she will find the appropriate basket and act accord-

ingly. It makes my life easier; if the question "What did I miss yesterday?" is asked, I point.

**3. Have a NO NAME folder.** Unless you teach in Lake Wobegon, your students will, on occasion, turn in work without their name. Certainly, my middle schoolers will! Later, when they note a missing assignment, you can ask: "Did you check the No Name folder?" I frequently hold up my red No Name folder with a declaration like, "Mr. No Name has an A in math! Do you?"

**4. Use an online grading program.** If your district does not use something like Pearson's PowerSchool student information system (the one we use), fight to get it. Such systems make it possible to share grades and other information via the Internet with students and parents. This makes for fewer parent phone calls, fewer students asking questions about their grades, less time spent preparing lists of missing assignments, and best of all, no last-minute panic at report card time. Parents and students appreciate having instant access to what is missing and what is due. But do not get behind on grading. You expect students to turn work in on time; have the courtesy to assess and return that work promptly. And frankly, I find myself much more accountable when grades are posted for parents to view.

**5. Have a board in the hall outside your classroom where you write what students need for class each period.** This method of reminding students what to bring each day helps teach them to be organized. Students can be overwhelmed with different classes and different teachers. Thinking of everything they'll need for the next hour during the four minutes between classes can be tough. A quick glance tells them whether they need their book, reminds them what homework is due, and helps them get it all together in a hurry.

**6. Write the day's lesson for each class period on the board.** This solves the perpetual "What are we doing today?" question as well as focuses you and

your students on the task at hand. I can take a quick look at the list to know what is next in my lesson plan. Students who are leaving for an afternoon appointment can poke their head in during the morning break to see what they will miss. Also, write reminders for the week and other notes on the board so kids learn to look there for important information. Help them learn to be responsible and plan ahead. Help them begin to tame the dragon.

**7. Expect students to come to class prepared.** I do not allow them to leave the room to get calculators, pencils, etc. I loan pencils, paper, textbooks, etc., and they are all in a designated area of the classroom. I do not loan calculators, but can set the tone for this by repeating, "If you really wanted it, you would have brought it to class." Time in the hall is wasted time, so I do not give students an excuse to leave. It becomes a non-issue as students learn to check the "What do I need for class?" board and realize I am not going to let them go wandering.

**8. Keep seating charts handy.** Put the charts on a lectern or other accessible location so you can take attendance in a split second as students are completing the class starter, a task written on the board to get their minds into gear. Mine also serve as rosters for fire drills, since I don't have a portable grade book, and they are invaluable for substitute teachers. Our attendance is required to be posted online within the first 10 minutes of class, so I transfer it as soon as the bell rings.

**9. Use email for parent contacts whenever possible.** This saves time and makes it easy to keep a "paper" trail. Parents appreciate the ease of contact. Talk to parents early on—establish a positive relationship before there are problems. Send them a positive email about something you notice about their student. Those positives are like money in the bank when you do encounter a discipline problem later in the year. And, from an organizational point of view, these upbeat notes encourage the practice of communicating by email.

**10. Let go of the things that don't really matter.** My first years in the classroom, I spent hours organizing my classroom-based library. When students returned books, I had to put the checkout cards back and re-shelve books in their appropriate location. A couple of years ago, I decided: Enough of that! Now students know my books are not organized. If they want a book, they will have to dig for it.

It is almost like a treasure hunt. Books in order may matter to you, but for me, those are hours better spent on other things. Examine your own classroom for those details that you can bring yourself to let go.

Amid the chaos that is my classroom, a sharp observer will see these little islands of organization, floating in the clutter and disarray. My students and I spend our time together engaged in learning, and for the most part, things run smoothly. If you suffer as I do from chronic disorganization, I'm betting that your classroom could benefit from these helpful stolen ideas.

I keep wishing for a magic wand full of organizational fairy dust, but until then, these simple strategies will have to do.

*Cossondra George is a 7th grade math and social studies teacher and school technology leader at Newberry Middle School in Newberry, Michigan. She's been borrowing good teaching ideas for more than 20 years.*

*Published August 21, 2007, in Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# Students Behave When Teachers Engage

By Anthony Cody

I started teaching at a middle school in Oakland, Calif., about 20 years ago. My first year was pretty rough. I was prepared to teach science, but my first semester I was given two periods of beginning Spanish, one of English, and two of science. My credential program had not really dealt much with behavior issues. The idea was to deliver a rich curriculum, and the management would take care of itself. If you are already teaching, you know this does not always work.

I floundered a bit the first year or two, and took help wherever I could find it. My best resources came from my colleagues down the hall. They had been at the school a few years and passed along valuable ways to make things work.

*Here are a few of the things I learned:*

- **I learned to post a short list of clear, unambiguous rules and enforce them consistently.** This is much harder to do than it sounds, and it took me many years to master.
- **I learned how important it was to phone parents early in the year, with positive news if at all possible.** Then the first phone call would not be one from me complaining about their child's behavior. One parent I phoned in September told me that mine was the first positive call she had ever received about her child. When I had to call about some problems a few months later, she was there to back me up 100 percent.
- **I learned to balance a negative phone call with a positive one.** The days after I would make phone calls, the students would often come in and ask

me, “Why did you call my house?” It was great to be able to point out that I was working with their parents in their best interests, and that I would make positive calls when behavior improved. I also found that my own disposition greatly improved after I made a positive call.

- **I learned to keep a record of student behavior, along with any referrals to the office, so that the problems I had with a few students were clearly documented.** I kept a record of phone calls home in the same book.
- **I learned how easy it was to get into entertaining but fruitless dialogues with students when I was trying to enforce rules.** It took me a while, but eventually I learned the best method was to give a warning or consequence clearly, and allow for discussion only after class.
- **I learned it was important for students to understand that I cared about their well-being, and that I was on their side.** This was done through caring communication and showing an interest in them as individuals by giving attention to their interests and abilities. And also through developing assignments that gave them more than one way to demonstrate their knowledge. Some students shine when speaking to the class, others excel at creative projects that illustrate what they’ve learned.
- **I tried using the textbook quizzes and tests, but found my students were performing miserably.** These tests featured 40 multiple-choice questions that required memorization. My students refused to memorize the textbook facts—they were bored with that, and their behavior reflected their boredom. So I began to think about the main points I was trying to get across and looked for engaging ways to make those main points stick. Then I made my tests reflect those main points and found the students did much better. I also looked for different ways for students to demonstrate their understanding through more creative projects, and I found the students became even more engaged.

For example, when learning about states of matter, I had students team

up and design their own experiments focusing on dry ice. They came up with ideas like measuring the amount of time the dry ice took to turn to vapor in different liquids; attempting to measure the temperature of the dry ice; or collecting and testing the vapor that the dry ice produced. After a review process, the teams carried out their experiments. Then, each team created a display and presented their results to their classmates. In the process, they all learned about the properties of dry ice—that it turns to vapor much more quickly in water than in air, that frozen carbon dioxide is much colder than water ice, and that the vapor is heavier than air and puts out a candle. Their findings led us into other explorations of the states of matter. They were having too much fun to misbehave!

The secret to behavior management is really about having the students fully engaged in the learning process, and it involves more than just rules and office referrals. After all, the whole point of getting the class to focus is to do some meaningful work—to reach new understandings, to create new expressions of their knowledge, and to build new skills. But we have to know how to manage our teacher-student relationships in order to get there.

*An award winning middle school science teacher, Anthony Cody is now the secondary science content coach for the Oakland, Calif., Unified School District, where he is also a leader in the Partnership for Oakland Science Inquiry Teaching (Project POSIT), which improves science instruction for grades 4-8 in partnership with local science agencies.*

*Published September 18, 2007,  
in Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# How to Smile Before Christmas

By Kathie Marshall

When I entered my first classroom many years ago, I found myself running to veteran teachers at the first sign of trouble, asking “What do you do?” Without fail I would hear someone say, “Don’t smile until Christmas!”

It seemed all of my experienced colleagues felt that unless you put forth a grim and commanding presence in the first months of school, any attempt at classroom discipline was doomed for the entire year.

I heard this mantra, but I didn’t want to believe it. Their advice didn’t square with my vision of the kind of teacher I wanted to be. As my career progressed, I would spend some time each summer refining my opening gambit for my newest crop of students—scrupulously avoiding any hint of the “Don’t smile until Christmas” philosophy. Eventually, I settled on this:

*Welcome to a new school year, students. It is my goal that each of you will be happy in our classroom each and every day. In order to make that happen, though, I have to be happy, too. So let’s work together to develop some class rules and routines that work for all of us.*

During nearly three decades as a classroom teacher, I have never had a problem getting students to develop a list of guidelines both they and I could live with. And I never hesitated to throw in rules that mattered to me. I called them my “pet peeves.”

We all know that pet peeves may be small things, but they are somehow important to the individual. For example, one of my pet peeves was having a student sharpen a pencil when I was talking to the class. So my rule was that students could sharpen pencils any time they wished as long as I wasn’t speaking. I faced little or no resistance to my pet-peeve rules. After all, I was being so pleasant about it, and they sensed that I sincerely had their best interests at heart.

Once the class routines were well-established, I never faced insurmountable difficulties with structuring lots of student discussion and collaboration into my lessons. Everyone understood and accepted the rules, and with this base to build on, it was relatively easy for me to give students more challenging situations in which they could demonstrate their ability to manage themselves well.

Today I work as a literacy coach, and I have found that many teachers are fearful of releasing their classroom control to students. So they exhaust themselves

instead, always standing at the front of the classroom and directing all instruction from what they see as a position of authority.

## Losing Control

If this strategy fails to create a positive climate (and that's often the case), it's likely because students feel no ownership of the rules and routines the teacher is trying to enforce, and they are more inclined to test the teacher's limits. Constantly having to fight for control of the classroom is both draining and defeating. By truly inviting students into the process, everyone wins, but especially the teacher.

A few years ago I worked with an interpreter for four deaf students who were in my classes. One day she said to me, "Your room is so active compared to other classrooms!" At first I didn't know if this was meant as a positive comment or a criticism, but she explained that my students always seemed to be fully engaged in activities, often working in pairs and small groups, while in most other classrooms the teacher spent a lot of time directing and managing the kids.

It was heartbreaking to me when one of my students wrote a reflection that began: "In our other classes we get in trouble when we want to talk about what we're learning." Students must talk to each other in order to learn deeply. My success in engaging students in lively investigations, discussions, and collaborative projects hinged on the foundation laid during those first few weeks of school, when we spent time developing a cooperative work ethic.

## Visual Appeal

Our positive atmosphere was bolstered by a classroom environment that was both visually appealing and student friendly. My grandmother wrote about and lectured on color theory, and I am my grandmother's grandchild. My room was always full of colorful displays and lots of student work samples. Even my homeroom students (who can be troublesome because they're less connected to the teacher and classroom) would enter my room and quietly wander around the walls, checking out the postings I'd carefully chosen to engage their attention.

I am convinced these two techniques—creating a feeling of shared ownership and maintaining an inviting classroom environment—worked wonders for me over a long career. My students knew I truly valued them and their learning. My extra efforts during the first few weeks of school paid off handsomely throughout the year. My students didn't have to wait until Christmas to see me smile. They quickly learned Mrs. Marshall's class was where they wanted to be.

As one of my students cried as she entered my room on the first day of school: "Oh, this is a *happy* place!"

*Kathie Marshall is a middle grades literacy coach in the Los Angeles Unified School District.*

*Published August 29, 2007, in Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# Hallway Hints

By John Norton

*It's the first week of school. Buses arrive early tomorrow morning and hundreds of chattering students will disembark, signaling the true end of summer. You're a veteran teacher who's rushing toward your classroom with the last armload of materials from your car. You spy an impossibly young adult, apparently frozen in place in the hallway. Your quick diagnosis: NTSS (new teacher shock syndrome). Your stomach remembers the anxiety of that day so many years ago. Your heart reaches out. But your head says you can spare only two minutes right now. What's your best advice?*

We recently put this scenario before members of the Teacher Leaders Network. Here's a sample of what we heard.

### Remember the Two P's— Patience and Pace

Someone once said, "Your goal as a first-year teacher is to be a second year teacher." The surest route to Year Two is patiently pacing yourself.

Focus on one thing at a time, says veteran Los Angeles teacher Jane Fung. Teaching is complex and you cannot master everything in a single day, week, month, or year. Be reflective, choose something you want to work on, and do it. Less is more sometimes. Your students will be OK. They will grow and progress as you grow and develop as an educator. "Teaching is a journey that is never-ending," Fung says. "I am still learning after 20 years, and I have a long way to go, too."

Indiana teacher-mentor Karen Molter assures new teachers that "it takes three years for the job to become what you dreamed it would be." In the first year, work to stay ahead of the kids by building the best lessons you can and

mastering the fundamentals of classroom management. The second year, address those lessons that reflection tells you need adjustment—look for ways to make them better and continue building your support systems. In the third year, the basics for teaching are in place, and you can begin devoting more of your time to creative strategies that require management finesse but will engage your students at the highest levels.

Patience is something novice teachers must consciously practice, says Virginia veteran Jon Hanbury. Patience with the children, patience with your colleagues, patience with yourself. "There is so much to learn that first year—so many demands that you can easily become overwhelmed by expecting perfection," she says. "Reflect constantly, but don't beat yourself up."

Don't try to do everything you're asked to do during your first year, recommends Renee Moore, a former Mississippi Teacher of the Year. Don't volunteer for every committee, event, or assignment. "Just because you're the new teacher does not mean you have to say yes to everything people try to dump on you." Teaching your students is your first priority. "Sometimes we try to impress our employers and co-workers with how hard we are willing to work and end up over-extended," says Moore. "But as one janitor so eloquently explained it to me: 'If the mule dies, they'll buy another mule.'"

Michelle Capen, a curriculum coach in North Carolina, agrees. Leave the building at a reasonable time and try to have a life outside of work. There is always something else to do in your classroom. "You can't be a good teacher," says Capen, "if you don't give yourself an opportunity to live a well-rounded life."

### Don't Go It Alone

"Don't isolate yourself," says Fung, who is also a Milken Award winner. Find a buddy to go to when you have questions about the school, students, instruction, payroll, or just need a shoulder to cry on. "There is always someone who will open

their door and their experience to you. Accept it!”

Look for a really good teacher with the 4 C’s (caring, compassionate, confident, and competent) in your building and build that relationship, advises Virginia teacher-mentor Joanie Hovatter. “Twenty four years after I entered my first classroom, my mentor is still someone I tap for advice.”

Linda Emm, a learning-community coach in Miami-Dade, encourages new teachers to look for at least one or two allies “who have your same beliefs about teaching and learning.” Within that allied group, keep focused on those things you can actually do something about. So much of what frustrates us is outside of our control, and when we put all of our attention there, it’s not only fruitless and time consuming, it can end up making us feel powerless. “If we keep the majority of our focus on what we can do in our classrooms with our students,” Emm has learned, “we set ourselves up to see results, and that energizes and sustains us.”

## Soak Up the School Culture

Over a 20-year career, Florida teacher Pam Davis has often found herself “the new kid on the block” after transferring to a new school. “I learned that listening to the school community was essential.” Network with the entire school staff, not just the teachers, she says. Paraprofessionals and custodial workers are often the adults who greet students upon arrival and dismiss them from after-care. “They know the families and are key to learning more about your students and the school climate. They know the history, rules, resources, how-to’s, and when-not-to’s. Just listen and keep asking.”

South Carolina teacher Louisa Jane Fleming makes a point to contact parents early and establish a relationship “that leads to their being open to listening, and supportive of your efforts on their child’s behalf.” In a high school, parents most often show up at athletic events or concerts, so Fleming makes an effort to attend and volunteer. She’s also quick to e-mail or phone when there’s something to celebrate, a question to be answered, or a small problem that could get worse. Fleming surveys parents at the beginning of the year, asking questions like: “What have previous teachers done that you and your child appreciated?” and “Is there anything about your child that you’d like me to know?” She’s discovered many important facts in the process, from overlooked medical conditions to favorite subjects, what the child likes to read, or successes in previous classes. “It’s all incredibly useful.”

Take the time to ride through the neighborhoods that send students to your school, says Barbara Thomson, recalling a tip she got from a college teacher many years ago.

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Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.  
6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100  
Bethesda, MD, 20814  
Phone: (301) 280-3100  
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