

What to Expect Your First Year of Teaching

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So Much More Than a Job

This book is for you if:

- You are about to take your first teaching assignment,
- You are involved in preparing and educating people to become certified teachers, or
- You want to read the insights, observations, and classroom tips of award-winning veteran and first-year teachers.

What award-winning teachers can tell you about their first year in the classroom

“Rather than saying, ‘I have a job,’ I say with delight, ‘I am a teacher!’ It’s so much more than a job, it’s an awakening.”—Stuart D. Chandler, fifth grade teacher, Aurora, CO

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About Sallie Mae and the First Class Teacher Award

Sallie Mae is a corporation that provides funding and servicing support for education loans. Sallie Mae annually sponsors the First Class Teacher Award to honor the nation’s most outstanding elementary and secondary educators during their first year of teaching. This program is implemented in cooperation with the American Association of School Administrators, the professional organization representing 15,000 education leaders nationwide.

The winners were nominated by their school superintendents and chosen by a panel of education experts based on their superior instructional skills and interaction with students, faculty and parents. One teacher from each state and the District of Columbia was chosen, and all 51 honorees came to Washington, DC in September 1996 to share their experiences as part of the awards activities.

Foreword

Going to the source

If you wanted to know what it's like to walk on the moon, you'd interview an astronaut. If you wanted insights on playing Hamlet, you'd study the performance of a Shakespearean actor. And if you wanted to know what the first year of teaching school is like, well... you'd ask teachers who just completed their first year on the job. We wanted to know and we asked.

This book attempts to capture the fascinating and inspiring answers we received. It is based largely on a series of discussions held among winners of the First Class Teacher Award sponsored every year by Sallie Mae, a corporation dedicated to education. As in years past, first-year teachers who won the award came to Washington, DC in the fall for a weekend of awards and related events.

One activity that grew out of the awards is a series of focus group discussions, which the U.S. Department of Education facilitated. These discussions are valuable debriefing sessions that allow us to ask exemplary first-year teachers some key questions: What was it like the first year? What were your toughest challenges, your greatest rewards? Did you get the right preparation? Do you have any insights you could offer new teachers?

The teachers talked in frank terms about what it's like to feel rebuffed by veteran teachers, to struggle with budget cutbacks, to see children in distress. But the obstacles they related are only half the story. They also told us how they surmounted challenges, what they would want new teachers to know, and why being a teacher is so crucial to their sense of self. All together, their words paint a picture of an inspired and inspiring group of up-and-coming leaders in their profession. We believe their reflections will prove helpful to principals, administrators, university professors in education departments, and particularly, new teachers who are gearing up to face the first day of school. *What to Expect Your First Year of Teaching* is built on the words and recollections of award-winning, first-year teachers. We have used direct quotations from teachers (with their permission), both from the focus group sessions and from a set of essays they wrote. We felt their voices needed to be heard as directly as possible. Our job was to present their insights in a way that would be useful for readers. What follows is our effort to do so.

Thank you for your interest, and we welcome your response.

Sincerely,

Sharon A. Bobbitt, Ph.D.
Director, Knowledge Applications Division
U.S. Department of Education

Introduction

Making the best use of this book

How the book is written

This book lets teachers speak for themselves whenever possible, because no one can match the clarity and veracity of their voices. However, each section includes narration summarizing and putting into context teachers' comments. The book also provides a section listing resources and offering a tips checklist for new teachers.

How the book is organized

Readers can, if they wish, go directly to the sections that interest them most. For example, a professor in a university education department might want to begin with the section that addresses teacher preparation. A rookie teacher might prefer to start with the section in which first-year teachers offer advice to their colleagues. And readers who want to read from start to finish will find that the sections are arranged in a coherent sequence.

A brief tour, start to finish

Teachers were asked to describe their most formidable challenges and then offer their advice for overcoming obstacles. Teachers then discussed how principals and administrators could help new educators and how colleges and universities could better prepare teachers for their first year on the job. Finally, teachers offered their thoughts about kids. The closing section of the book includes a bonus—a list of resources followed by tips for first-year teachers from their veteran colleagues.

Challenges

No one said it was going to be easy

And it wasn't. Shortages of money, supplies and planning time were commonly cited as obstacles to learning. Teachers also lamented overcrowded classrooms and stacks of paperwork that diverted their attention from their mission to educate.

Frustration took its toll on many teachers—the result of a nagging sense of deprivation. And teachers felt the pinch of limited resources in a number of ways—not just financially. Many teachers told stories of colleagues and parents who were stingy with their support, encouragement and involvement.

Another challenge was the diversity of student achievement and ability levels. Teachers often responded by trying to develop lessons that could reach all students, whatever their level of proficiency.

“The greatest difference between my expectations and actual classroom experiences has been the arduous task of balancing lessons that target the high achievers and low achievers in the same classroom. . . . During the first six weeks of teaching pre-algebra, I altered my teaching strategies to reach those students who counted on their fingers, those who multiplied and divided on a beginner level, and those who have surpassed all eighth grade objectives.”—Lori G. Rich, 8th grade, Texas

“Every whole-class lesson I teach must account for James (who doesn't recognize half the letters of the alphabet) and Jessica (who is a very fluent reader).”—Amy D. Weber-Salgo, 1st–3rd grades, Nevada

“By October, I discovered that my students’ developmental levels ranged from pre-primer reading, writing, and math levels to that of third grade. To accommodate the various levels, daily planning has required extra care and consideration to ensure that each child’s needs are met. I constantly ask myself. . . . ‘How can I keep ‘Gabriel,’ a very bright student who always manages to finish his work before the rest of his classmates, occupied for the last ten minutes while the rest of the class is still working and I’m still teaching a reading group? How can I continue to challenge and stimulate students who are at third grade reading and math levels while allowing students who are at pre-primer to second grade levels to keep their pace?’ ”—
Phu N. Ly, 2nd grade (inclusive), Massachusetts



Teachers spoke of demoralizing budget cuts and spending several hundred to over \$1,000 of their own money to buy the books and other supplies they so desperately needed. One teacher created many of her own texts.

“Schools need resources! . . . We had to cut six teachers. They are cutting the library, cutting extracurricular activities. . . . What do you expect from us? We know why kids aren’t learning!”—Kari A. Peiffer, 1st–4th grades, Montana

“The students are so needy. And, there’s no budget. I had to do everything without money and beg, borrow or steal.”—Lisa M. Shipley, 7th and 8th grades, Missouri



Class size remains a vexing issue

“I have 38 kids and 34 desks. I hope they don’t all show up for school!”—Katharine L. Hager, 7th grade, Hawaii

“Class size must be limited to 20 students. We are set up to fail with classes of 30–38 students. The kids feel ignored.”—Grace D. Clark, 9th–11th grades, Virginia



Teachers want more time and less bureaucracy

“We need time to plan. In my district, we only get 20 minutes before school and 30 minutes after school. It’s simply not enough time. I think we should receive an hour and a half of planning time daily.”—Melinda J. Stull, prekindergarten–5th grade, New Mexico

“Mountains of paperwork took away from teaching time and added to the level of stress. I’m in an affluent district, but the central office has lots of bookkeeping and we have to fill out forms in triplicate when we could do it on the computer. . . . I came from the business world, so it’s even more frustrating.”—Thomas R. Leinheiser, 3rd grade, Alabama



Parents were a problem if they didn’t participate in their children’s learning. Sometimes, they were a problem if they participated too much.

“Lack of parental support was an issue. I didn’t hear from my parents all year. . . . Why? I guess because the students are needy, parents are working, and the schools are intimidating.”—Kerry Kapper, 5th grade (inclusive), Vermont

“My district is very political and the parents are horrible, asking to change grades, etc. I have no support from the administration. For example, one parent, a local doctor, called

regarding his daughter's 89.3 and the guidance counselor stepped in and said he wasn't telling me what to do, but said it would be in my best interest to raise her grade. I didn't do it. I left the district after my first year because of the administration. Eventually, the parents backed off when I didn't bend. Administration constantly promised action and didn't follow through."—Jeffrey Nyhuis, 9th–11th grades, New Jersey

"The lack of parenting. Many parents were afraid to tell kids no when they needed to be told no. Many parents were in crisis and thereby placed their kids in crisis. It was so distressing. Teachers can only do so much if parents are not there to help. I grew up spoiled—I had great parents. So I was not really prepared for the problems I encountered that were the result of students who had not received good parenting."—William C. Smith, 7th grade, New York



Mandated tests often set students' momentum back and ate up valuable classroom time.

"Some of my most serious problems related to the basic tests that were administered to my students. Some were not able to qualify for special education, others were not able to qualify for bilingual education. In other cases, I would build up the confidence of students to where they felt good about themselves and then the state slapped them down with a required proficiency examination that was too difficult for students at their stage of development."—Rebecca Baumann, 9th–11th grades, Michigan

Sometimes new teachers felt like upstarts, bringing an infusion of energy and new ideas that were not always welcome.

“When you try to implement innovations, some people resist and it is no good. Much innovation is bottom-up driven—upper grade teachers are resistant to collaborating.”—Scott D. Niemann, 3rd and 4th grades, Alaska

“It’s depressing to be around people who’ve lost their love of teaching.”—Sarah E. Drake, 9th–12th grades, Illinois

“Most veteran teachers are terrific. But it only takes one in a group to turn up the negativism.”—Catherine McTamany, 9th–12th grades, Tennessee

“My first year of teaching had some horrible moments. I was the youngest on the staff by 15 years, a man in a school with a staff that was 90 percent women, and everyone else was over 50 years old. I was new on the faculty, and I was also working as an administrator. My colleagues called me names, they couldn’t believe a man my age had authority in the school. It was a complete surprise. In this school all the teachers had 20-plus years experience teaching. I didn’t go through that system, so the teachers resented it.”—Mark L. Bode, 9th–12th grades, Louisiana

“You may encounter negativity. Be ready for it. Remain focused on the positive others have to offer.”—Sara M. Hagarty, 10th grade, Delaware

“All of us are here because we are who we are and we love what we’re doing. Close the door, ignore whoever’s giving you negative energy right now and be who you are.”—Michelle L. Graham, kindergarten and 1st grade, Minnesota

Tips and Strategies from First-Year Teachers

Advice?

First-year teachers had a lot of it to offer to new teachers who follow them. Their tips ran the gamut—from memorizing students' names right away to making peace with the realization that some children cannot be reached. Teachers also offered practical advice on classroom management, working with parents, and more.

Broader themes were the need for clear, high expectations for students' academic performance and behavior. Overall, teachers recommended an approach that is nurturing but firm. And, they advised, prepare for classes and then prepare some more.

“Before you begin on the first day, be as prepared as you possibly can. Set up your room. Look around. Is there anything anywhere that would distract you if you were a student? Move around the room and ask the same question from a number of different spots, e.g., spots from which students should be working and observing. Always put your plans on the board—before class begins. Everyone here would be lying if they didn't admit that they were nervous on the first day!”—Thomas Muller, 9th–12th grades, Oregon

“Think about every stupid question that could be asked as a result of your lesson plan. Do they contain any words that could set students off? I didn't realize how silly kids can be. Something as simple as a squeaky chair will set them off. You need to develop a range of appropriate responses and be able to deliver them with a straight face. Sometimes it is important to let them be kids and be silly when they want to, but you should choose those times.”—Catherine McTamane, 9th–12th grades, Tennessee

“Over plan! Prepare two hours for every hour of actual teaching. The day will go faster than you expect. You need to avoid the dreaded 15 minutes at the end when you will be asking yourself, ‘What do I do now?’—Catherine McTamane, 9th–12th grades, Tennessee

“You have to be very organized. Five minutes of unorganized time can lead to chaos.”—Phu N. Ly, 2nd grade (inclusive), Massachusetts



Prepare, but then again . . . be prepared to wing it if that’s what it takes.

“I had to turn in my entire week’s lesson plans on Monday to the principal. I learned not to stick with the lesson plans. The teachable moments go further. Too much structure can make you too stressed out to be creative.”—Kerry Kapper, 5th grade (inclusive), Vermont

“Often I just ripped up my lesson plans. Teach the kids, don’t teach the lesson plans.”—Thomas R. Leinheiser, 3rd grade, Alabama



Set clear, reasonable expectations that communicate consistency and high standards.

“Set expectations and standards in clear language. Establish a vision and stick to it. Even in little things like the right heading at the top of the paper. Expect the best of all your students.”—Lisa M. Shipley, 7th and 8th grades, Missouri

“Set high expectations for the students from the first day. Even if it means taking extra time for some students, high expectations—high results.”—Jeffrey Breedlove, 10th–12th grades, Kansas



Many teachers summarized their classroom management strategies in a single word—respect.

“Keep it simple. . . . You don’t have to spell out everything. Respect. . . .” Conni Neugebauer, kindergarten–4th grade, South Dakota

“Always live up to the same rules you set up for them. Keep them simple and justifiable. ‘Respect’ is the only rule I have on my classroom wall.”—Catherine McTamaney, 9th–12th grades, Tennessee

“I don’t like to have too many rules or kids will forget them. My students help set up the rules, which makes them more respectful of them.”—Mark White, 5th grade, Nebraska



Stay cool under fire. Criticism can be turned to an advantage.

“Sometimes it is so easy to want to defend yourself with the principal or parents. I learned how to listen, to try to understand where they’re coming from. Parents’ concerns are very real.”—Phu N. Ly, 2nd grade (inclusive), Massachusetts

“You can feel like you are being critiqued. Instead of being defensive, you can say, ‘Hey, that’s right’.”—Scott D. Niemann, 3rd and 4th grades, Alaska

Use innovations in teaching, technology, and rewards.

“Dividing topics into smaller, more manageable, and therefore, more achievable tasks has encouraged students to take it one step at a time. Presenting a variety of student-centered lessons that require active student participation has stimulated student interest. Relating information to students’ lives and establishing a reason for learning has increased student participation. Second, I have established a very pro-active (some might call it aggressive) make-up policy. My No Zero Tolerance program uses computerized grade software to track students. Students receive a weekly status report that lists grades and highlights any zero.”—Grace D. Clark, 9th–11th grades, Virginia

“I have ‘cool cash rewards’ that can be redeemed in the ‘Shipley Store,’ which has things that local businesses have donated. Rewards will take you further than punishments in the long run.”—Lisa M. Shipley, 7th and 8th grades, Missouri

Other recommendations included:

- *Make friends with the custodial staff—you’ll need them;*
- *Reach out to parents and form relationships with them before problems begin;*
- *Get to know your students by coaching or taking part in an extracurricular activity;*
- *Take care of yourself physically and spiritually, and*
- *Don’t forget, you’re only human.*

“Reach out to the parents. Let them know from the start that you know they are very important to their child’s education and that you want to work with them. That they are central to the process. That you are looking for their interest and concern. Formally or informally form some kind of parent–teacher contract. Make regular, positive calls home, not just negative or critical ones.”—William C. Smith, 7th grade, New York

“I have two rules: get parents on your side, and allow yourself to make mistakes.”—Phu N. Ly, 2nd grade (inclusive), Massachusetts

“I make a lot of home visits. This challenged me to love the kids more. The home visits were made both on school time and on my time. Every Wednesday I visited the homes of the kindergarten kids. This helped me relate to the kids a lot better.”—Christopher W. Albrecht, kindergarten–7th grade, West Virginia

“Right before school started we set up a ‘sneak preview’ of what those first days of school were going to be like. Before school officially started, we invited kids and parents to come by for an hour so we could talk and share.”—Mark White, 5th grade, Nebraska

“Develop a really good relationship with the administration. You question, ‘Will they back me up?’ Lots of time they are viewed as the enemy—teachers versus the administration. You need the administration and the office. Secretaries make or break you. Teaching is very political. Who you know and having access.”—Jeffrey Breedlove, 10th–12th grades, Kansas



Get to know another side of the kids.

“Extracurricular activities. I got to know the kids better and watched them mature and see the leadership side of their personalities. I have some of the same kids in class. The kids see me beyond the instructor role, see me as available for questions, and that builds the relationship.”—Sebastian C. Shipp, 9th–12th grades, North Carolina

“I recommend coaching to give you an edge. I coach volleyball. And teaching drama allows me to work with all students. You must have a high energy level and be willing to put in the extra time. They will appreciate it.”—Stephanie D. Bell, 9th and 10th grades, South Carolina

“Being involved in drama production after school was one of the highlights. Like many teachers, during my regular schedule, I teach students at only one grade level, while in drama I worked with kids from all levels. They were very generous and I was able to develop a much broader range of relationships than in class.”—Sara M. Hagarty, 10th grade, Delaware

Additional quick tips follow:

“Learn students’ names correctly and quickly.”—Delissa L. Mai, 9th grade, Wyoming

“Learn to laugh at yourself. A sense of humor is critical.”—Katharine L. Hager, 7th grade, Hawaii

“My advice is to develop rapport with the kids, to adapt to hit it off with the kids—you need to click. Beyond the curriculum—you have to click.”—Jeffrey Breedlove, 10th–12th grades, Kansas

“Expose yourself as being human and being real. Don’t be afraid to get down and dirty, do what they’re doing, work when they are working. Keep a written list of what needs to be changed for next year. Try things and if they don’t work, write them down.”—Jill P. Clark, 9th and 11th grades, Pennsylvania

“First year teachers have to remember that, ‘We can’t save everyone’ and not take it personally. I had one child who just dug in and did not want my help. I have to balance my guilt and how much I could really do to help.”—Allison L. Baer, 4th–6th grades, Ohio

“Teachers can’t forget about the importance of their own mental and physical health or they will fall apart. Find time to go out with your colleagues to talk about mutual ideas and problems—let off steam. There are tons of kids sneezing and coughing on you every day. You need to be healthy to be a good teacher. I jog in the morning like any good prize-fighter.”—Christopher D. Markofski, kindergarten, Washington



Teaching is not a popularity contest, and students are not your best friends. Respect is more important than affection, teachers said.

“It is okay if kids don’t like you. They need to respect you. A lot of teachers want to be buddies.”—Katharine L. Hagar, 7th grade, Hawaii

“You are not friends. You have to distinguish.” —Phu N. Ly, 2nd grade (inclusive), Massachusetts

“Don’t hang out with high school kids—you establish friendly rapport, you don’t want to be pals.”—Jeffrey Breedlove, 10th–12th grades, Kansas

How Can Principals and Administrators Help First-Year Teachers?

Break the isolation

Teachers who worked in teams and with mentors, or who had continuous contact with other first-year teachers, relished the camaraderie. For many teachers, however, professional isolation proved difficult.

These teachers spoke wistfully of the need for more guidance and support from veteran teachers as well as opportunities to work closely with colleagues.

“I was surprised how isolated some teachers are. I believe that sharing ideas is what teaching is about.”—Colette L. Born, 5th grade, Idaho

“I felt alone. It was my challenge, my work. There was no one else to help me meet a whole array of new challenges. I had to meet them by myself.”—Catherine McTamaney, 9th–12th grades, Tennessee

“We are limiting ourselves by not being able to learn from each other.”—Michelle L. Graham, kindergarten and 1st grade, Minnesota



In contrast, teachers who received the attention and support of their veteran colleagues found the experience indispensable.

“I wouldn’t be here today without my mentor. He’s a math teacher, and we bounce ideas off each other. I didn’t know what to expect, but I’m glad to have a mentor who is a lot like me.”—Jeffrey Nyhius, 9th–11th grades, New Jersey

“Mentors are very important. Every new teacher should have a mentor teacher who can help her or him to break in. It would also be helpful to connect first- and second-year teachers. The second-year teachers would have fresh memories of experiences that first-year teachers would encounter and would be able to give them some forewarning and suggestions regarding how to best handle those experiences.”—William C. Smith, 7th grade, New York

“Mentors are great. Our state mandated a mentoring system for first-year teachers. When we met we focused on one topic or need. It helped me to get concrete ideas, to know ahead of time what to expect, and to come to the learning activity well prepared.”—Rebecca Baumann, 9th–11th grades, Michigan



First-year teachers who worked in teams say the experience broadened their perspective.

“My team of teachers met every week and shared ideas. Sometimes we switched classes and taught portions of each others’ classes. I had a lot of colleague support.”—Michelle L. Graham, kindergarten and 1st grade, Minnesota

“We paired fifth grade and kindergarten students together as Reading Buddies, which gave the teachers the opportunity to plan activities together and to understand each others’ challenges.”—Colette L. Born, 5th grade, Idaho

In addition to creating work teams and assigning mentors, administrators can help first-year teachers by fostering a supportive atmosphere and convening teacher meetings.

“Have meetings that bring first-year teachers together. You find out that you are not the only one.” —Grace D. Clark, 9th–11th grades, Virginia

“All first-year teachers in my district meet three times a month. We wrote a journal every week with problems and successes. I was able to start using other teachers’ ideas for my own classes. I bonded with the other first-year teachers. A total of about 80 to 100 teachers met in a school auditorium, broken into groups by grade level.” —Neal Downing, prekindergarten–6th grade, Washington, D.C.

“New teachers broke up into support groups at the same grade level. We were excited and upset about the same things.” —Michelle L. Graham, kindergarten and 1st grade, Minnesota

“Support from colleagues. Couldn’t have survived without their help. Constantly went to colleagues and drew upon their experience and expertise. I never felt alone or stranded for ideas. I learned that teachers are a generous lot.” —William C. Smith, 7th grade, New York



Schools and districts that help teachers work productively with parents and foster parent cooperation reaped generous benefits.

“‘Community Involved in Schools’ is the slogan for our entire town, it’s a banner as you enter the town. Parents are very involved. Parents get upset if a teacher doesn’t call. It’s easier for me to call home because I know I have parent support. The

kids learn that, ‘Here’s one person who cares about me for one third of the day, here are other people who care about me for the other two thirds of the day.’ The parent/teacher/student triangle is easier to deal with.”—Sebastian C. Shipp, 9th–12th grades, North Carolina

“In our first-year teacher meetings we did practice telephone calls to parents and prepared for PTA meetings. We learned what we should discuss and how to approach different issues.”—Neal Downing, prekindergarten–6th grade, Washington, D.C.

What Colleges and Universities Should Know

From the 'ivory tower' to the 'real world'

Without fail, teachers gave their colleges and universities high marks. BUT. . . .

Teachers said there were areas of their preparation that could have been strengthened—from working more on computers to spending more time in real classrooms to learning more about some of the social problems affecting young people today. Teachers suggested a number of new initiatives they believed universities should consider.

Teachers also conceded that there were issues for which no college or university could have prepared them. For example, the university classroom was no match for the real-world challenges of gang violence, 'mainstreamed' children and the never-ending demands of paperwork.

“College did not prepare me for the student whose mother was murdered by a jealous boyfriend; for the student who witnessed a drive-by shooting; for the student who was removed from her home because of an abusive father. These realities do not exist in textbooks, yet they are, sadly, all too often the realities that people—with real lives and real problems—bring into my classroom. Perhaps universities could in the future focus on teaching teachers to teach students with a lot of problems. I find that I fill a million roles in a day—parent, teacher, friend, hero, disciplinarian, counselor, etc. Teaching English, my specialty area, is often a secondary role. Perhaps universities could focus on how to fill the many demanding roles of teaching. Doing this would better prepare teachers to meet the pressing needs of their students.”—Lisa M. Shipley, 7th and 8th grades, Missouri

“No amount of lectures, books or student teaching could have prepared me for the enormity of teaching. However, the more experiences with children a program provides, the better. I think my college program could have placed more emphasis on children and the absolute necessity of commitment to them. Subject matter and instructional methods are very important to quality teaching, but without a strong commitment to children success is unlikely.”—Mark White, 5th grade, Nebraska

“Before I became a new teacher, I never realized the social dimension involved with instructing eighth graders. As students in the year 1996, my children are dealing with issues I never imagined when I was a 13-year-old. AIDS, abuse, neglect, drugs, and sex are ‘buzz words’ I overhear in the hallways, classrooms, lunchroom, and library. As an individual, I personally do not deal with most of these problems because they are not direct issues in my life. Yet, as a teacher, mentor and friend, I have to deal with these issues every day. I have students who have been physically and mentally abused, whose parents have been removed from their homes because of drugs, and who have had family members and close friends die of AIDS.”—Melissa Luroe, 7th and 8th grades, Maryland

“I don’t feel that my university could have better prepared me for the classroom. I learned many methods and theories of teaching, but have found that true teaching knowledge comes from experience. I am certain that I will continue to learn as long as I’m in the teaching profession. As we know, each day is filled with new opportunities.”—Melissa G. Lambert, 2nd grade, Oklahoma

Teachers cited several areas in which they felt unprepared for their first year on the job.

“I feel that my college education was very thorough, but nothing could quite prepare me for the planning and preparation it requires to accommodate students across five grade levels. I definitely have learned the value of peers in education. The students learn so much from each other.”—Conni Neugebauer, kindergarten–4th grade, South Dakota

“Staff training! Mainstreaming, full inclusion—I had very little of this in college and then I had a multihandicapped child in my class.” Scott D. Niemann, 3rd and 4th grades, Alaska

“While my college prepared me well for teaching, it did not prepare me for using technology in the classroom. I feel that I need more training in the use of all technology.”—Helen M. Wright, 2nd grade (inclusive), Mississippi

“I expected there to be a clear cut way to assign grades. At the University of Nevada, Reno, I learned how to assess individual lessons, but not how to decide between an A– or B+. I learned in several classes about using rubrics, but I didn’t fully understand how to develop and implement one until I saw a demonstration in an in–service class last fall.”—Amy D. Weber–Salgo, 1st–3rd grades, Nevada



Teachers listed practical suggestions that colleges and universities could use in improving their education programs.

“I think that an internship at a crisis shelter or detention home would be an invaluable addition to the hands-on experience of student teaching. The huge number of youth affected by the gamut of social issues is hidden in most classrooms. On any

given day I have no idea who was beaten the night before, who has eaten within the past 24 hours, and who is using illegal drugs just to make it through the day. A social work class and an internship at a drug crisis center would open many more eyes than mine.”—Delissa L. Mai, 9th grade, Wyoming

“Universities in general could help prepare future teachers by offering classroom management courses, by putting education majors in the schools earlier, by placing student teachers in settings that more closely resemble the assignments of typical first year teachers, and by providing a post-graduation mentor program.”—Stephanie D. Bell, 9th and 10th grades, South Carolina

“I think that colleges should require students to take a ‘September Experience’ before they student teach. That is, colleges could assign students to a master teacher for before-school inservice experiences. The student could then participate in meetings and the other mundane but needed projects.”—Thomas Muller, 9th–12th grades, Oregon

“It would have been ideal for my college to have instituted a mentoring program or to have aided students in establishing cohort groups. The experience of first year teaching can indeed be one of isolation and self-questioning. The opportunity to have had a support group of other graduate students would have provided me with avenues for in-depth discussion and for the brainstorming of ideas. I would also have benefited from learning about the varied experiences that my fellow students were encountering in their clinical and student teaching assignments.”—Jeannette L. Whaland, kindergarten, New Hampshire

“Creating ‘career ladders’ during an undergraduate program would be an excellent way for future teachers to experience their careers prior to college graduation. College students could choose a school or a county, and they could start creating links with students, teachers, and faculty. Just as my eighth graders love to relate school to ‘real-life experiences,’ so do college students. They could connect what they are learning inside college classrooms to situations inside elementary, middle and high school classrooms. In addition, new teachers could experience team teaching, school-wide team organization, and interdisciplinary units, as well as the K-12 continuum. Career ladders could also help provide new teachers with effective, experienced mentors and the opportunity to meet ‘real-life’ students.”—Melissa Luroe, 7th and 8th grades, Maryland

Voices

Meditations on the year

When they looked back, teachers remembered moments of poignancy, joy, and struggle—and sometimes the fear of the unknown. But all seemed somehow transformed, even emboldened, by their first year teaching.

What stands out is the teachers' untainted optimism, which is repeatedly put to the test and yet emerges intact. The other striking quality is how privileged these teachers feel in serving children.

“When the bell rang at 8:15 a.m. on August 28th, a new reality entered my mind. Parents stopped by the classroom to familiarize themselves with the new third- and fourth-grade teacher in the village. Some of the concerned looks I spied on the parents' faces as they left their children were heartfelt. Breaking out in a cold sweat, I realized the amount of trust the parents were handing over to me. There was one term that entered my mind, ‘in loco parentis,’ a legal term meaning in place of the parents. I was taking on the responsibility of a parent! Following the first day, I expressed my concern to a fellow teacher and he replied, ‘Encargada!’ He explained how this is a Spanish term often said in Mexico by parents when they are putting their child's life in a teacher's hands. It means we are handing our child over to you and now you are in charge. Wow! What a responsibility. A couple of weeks passed and I was still in shock. . . . I tried to create a nurturing, educational and safe environment for these students—then I would be fulfilling my job as an educator, right? Surprisingly, I still felt the responsibility 24 hours a day! Teaching wasn't only my job, it was fast becoming my lifestyle.”—Scott D. Niemann, 3rd and 4th grades, Alaska

“I pictured an idyllic classroom; students busily scratching away at original poetry, analytical discussions of Herman Hesse and Sylvia Plath, debates which lasted far after the bell rang. I should have supposed from my interview at Hunters Lane [High School] that my experience might not match my expectations. The position available was in a room where two tenured teachers had already quit, and the students had tried to superglue their last sub to his desk. In a way, I was luckier than I knew to have had such a challenge. I wouldn’t have been the first teacher to fail in that classroom. I began teaching with the idea that if I was terrible at it, no one would know. There was no pressure. I spoke to my students as I had hoped my teachers would have spoken to me when I was in high school. I did the types of activities that kept me interested, that I found enjoyable, that made materials I myself wasn’t proficient in learnable, concise, and fun. Turns out, my students enjoyed it, too. By not feeling I had to, I ended up teaching better than I thought I could. My first year has been as disappointing as it was rewarding, though. . . . I have lost and found hope, reviewed and revised, and finally concluded that my presence here is much more important than I had thought it would be.”—Catherine McTamaney, 9th–12th grades, Tennessee

“Along with being the ‘mender of hurts,’ where does the mender go to get mended? Teaching is an exhausting job (this was not a surprise). I did not, however, expect to be emotionally exhausted. I suppose the easiest way out of this dilemma would be to make myself emotionally unavailable to my students and become a true teaching machine void of any feelings. The maker of excellent lesson plans and doer of fantastic scholastic deeds. I could teach those children like they have never been taught before. I have no feelings! You can’t hurt me! Don’t tell me your problems, I am teacher! Teachers don’t do feelings and emotions—we teach. . . . Not this teacher. This teacher can’t help but share in some of those emotional moments. Maybe that’s why they come to me so often. I can’t turn off a portion

of myself when I walk into the classroom. It's either the whole Mrs. Baer or nothing. And the whole Mrs. Baer needs to learn where she can go to remain whole. Could I have learned this at KSU (Kent State University)? I sincerely doubt it. This one I need to figure out by myself."—Allison L. Baer, 4th–6th grades, Ohio

"My education warned me about the kid who claims that the dog ate the homework but not about the kid who was up all night in the emergency room with her sister who was stabbed. We are taught to teach students, but not people who live in a very real, very scary world. Gangs, broken homes, violence, and fear. These are the unwritten realities of the teaching profession. I was not prepared for the huge responsibility of being a part of this safe place we call school. I came to my position with a strong background in my subject area, realistic expectations regarding student work, and a great deal of caring and drive. I never expected to be a part of what is often the only structure, safety, security, and sanity my students experience in a day. I consider myself privileged to be in a position to have such a positive impact on the lives of my students."—Lisa M. Shipley, 7th and 8th grades, Missouri

"Working with my special education students has been particularly rewarding. Rosie, an autistic child, talks to me now and can say her name. Possibly she could have reached these milestones in another classroom, but it happened in mine. What greater joy can a teacher feel than to witness a child's successes?"—Michelle L. Graham, kindergarten and 1st grade, Minnesota

"Eric was a likable student, and although he participated in discussion, he was often distracted. He rarely turned in assignments and had yet to turn in an essay assignment. He was friendly and responsive when I would greet him at the door, but whenever I wanted to talk about his writing, he would

become distant. It was obvious that he had a confidence problem in regards to his writing skills and I soon found out why. He told me that he had failed every writing class he'd taken and that his last teacher told him, 'There was no hope,' and that she could tell, 'He didn't learn a thing in her class.' . . . I began to focus on building his confidence by giving him non-threatening writing assignments supplemented with pats on the back and extra smiles. In particular, I created situations in which I knew he could succeed. Within weeks, Eric began turning in both regular writing assignments. And every chance I got I tried to relate to him in a positive way. Not everything we talked about had to do with his work. In fact, most of our interaction was about everyday life. But I saw Eric growing. He discussed more in class, turned in assignments on time, and most importantly, began writing again."—Rebecca Baumann, 9th–11th grades, Michigan

“My first year of teaching has been full of many wonderful surprises. I never knew the average teenage girl’s voice could hit such octaves. I never expected to reach a point in my life where I would yearn for my bed at 9:30 every night. I was not prepared for the moment I first heard myself ask, ‘Does anyone in class not think that spitting on the floor is inappropriate behavior?’ But most of all, I never thought that teaching would be such an exhilarating and rewarding career, continually pushing me in my quest to be a master educator. . . . My job is creeping into every aspect of my life. How many people can pick up a box of corn flakes and have it trigger an idea for a lesson plan about government regulation? . . . Teaching stimulates my creative juices like nothing I have ever experienced. . . . Finally, there is one last bit of wisdom that I would like to pass on to colleges regarding the first year of teaching. Don’t focus in on the negative side of the profession. I must have spent hours listening to first year teachers, who appeared gaunt, malnourished and exhausted, drone on about how they were ‘coping.’ It’s no wonder that so many potentially good

teachers are scared off so early. Reinforce the intrinsic rewards that teaching offers. Stress that as a teacher you will experience the satisfaction of knowing you make a difference, the ability to have a marked effect on the life of an emerging adult, and the excitement of advancing young minds. These are the things I did not expect.”—Jeffrey Breedlove, 10th–12th grades, Kansas

“Teachers are the last bastion against darkness and ignorance. The intensity of this need was my surprise, and I know of no way even Kennesaw [State College], in all its excellence, could prepare me for this life lesson. Only being a caring teacher can.”—James W. Morris, 5th grade (inclusive), Georgia

“All of my life, my career goal was to become a professional football player. After tryouts for both the National and Canadian Football Leagues, my lifetime dream began to fade. . . . I knew, however, that with the help of God, I would choose another career that would give my life meaning; enable me to give back to my people; and emerge a stronger person with a sense of purpose. What better career could there be than that of an elementary school physical education teacher, just like my father who dedicated 35 years of his life to the boys and girls of the DC School system? . . . From the first moment that I was alone with a class, there was no doubt in my mind that these students needed me, my experience, energy and dedication. Using the curriculum and other materials provided me by the DC [District of Columbia] School system, those I developed, and of course, those of my dad, I would create a meaningful instructional program and an environment filled with unlimited love and respect.”—Neal Downing, prekindergarten–6th grade, Washington, DC

The Kids

In the end, what else is there?

Kids are and always will be what great teachers live for. Their smiles are an antidote to a bad day, and their progress is an unending source of satisfaction. Without exception, all teachers spoke effusively of their love for children and commitment to their learning progress.

“I still can not get used to how much my heart soars with every student’s success, and how a piece of my heart is plucked away when any student slips away.”—Delissa L. Mai, 9th grade, Wyoming

“You can never go home without a smile on your face when you teach kids. I was always beaming at the end of the day. And it was so inspirational each morning to see that the kids were excited to be back at school. I would meet their buses and they would be making happy faces to me against the bus windows. Their love is unconditional.”—Christopher D. Markofski, kindergarten, Washington

“There is nothing like the look in a child’s eye when you reassure them that you, too, lost your library book, or that you also felt sad and alone when your parents got divorced. Another joy is hearing ‘Hey, look at my story now. I’m using capitals and periods.’ One of my jobs is being a source of building self-esteem in a child. This gives more satisfying prestige than any other that could be earned. For me, my greatest sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction comes from seeing my students comfortable with who they are and eager to embrace the world around them.” Terra N. Hess, 1st grade (inclusive), California

“How do I do justice in explaining a profession which possesses every possible high and low in the array of human emotion? If you will, close your eyes and imagine the sound of eight prepubescent voices screeching, ‘OOOOOhhhh, I get it!’ How does anyone but a teacher know the thrill of hearing and seeing the ‘light of understanding?’ Is it possible that anyone understands what it’s like to finish reading *Tuck Everlasting* only to look up and see a pair of eyes, glossy and on the verge of tears? Has anybody outside of teaching every bothered to ask kids, ‘What do you think?’ Nobody knows what it’s like to be put on center stage, after reading *Nightjohn* when a child sincerely asks, ‘Why are people racist?’ How many people ask themselves at 3 p.m. on Monday, ‘Why in the world am I doing this?’ and at 8:30 a.m. on Tuesday they can answer their own question with a smile? Nobody knows the pride I have when I talk to old friends and rather than saying, ‘I have a job,’ I say with delight, ‘I am a teacher!’ It’s so much more than a job, it’s an awakening.”—Stuart D. Chandler, 5th grade, Colorado

“The *kids*, they made it all worthwhile. One boy was my guardian angel to make sure that I survived. He would say, ‘I really liked your class.’ I expected hints of that feeling, but hearing it and feeling it are different things. The emotion was unbelievable when the children left.”—Thomas R. Leinheiser, 3rd grade, Alabama

Veteran Teachers Talk

The wisdom of experience

Award-winning veteran teachers have supplied a set of tips to pass on to their first-year colleagues. Some recurring suggestions: contact parents in the beginning of the school year, fostering a friendly rapport before problems arise; be well prepared for class; and model and enforce rules of courtesy and respect. Here are a few samples of veteran teachers' tips:

- Consistency—do what you say you are going to do at all times and with every child.
- Model a love for learning.
- Maintain a sense of humor.
- Offer a variety of interesting choices of activities for kids when they finish work or have down time.
- Keep an open door to parents.
- Reward and praise students.
- Maintain respect above all.
- Learn the names of your students quickly and correctly.
- Don't be sarcastic to children or correct them in ways that cause embarrassment.

Veteran teachers' advice in a nutshell: be yourself, work with parents, love the kids, love teaching.

“A few years ago I read what I think is the best piece of advice I ever read on classroom discipline. . . . The upshot was this: when teachers were behaving in ways that made them comfortable, classroom discipline was best, and the kids learned the most. In other words, teachers who liked quiet, orderly classes could not effectively fake a loose, casual demeanor. Conversely, teachers who were by nature less structured could not ‘pretend’ to be strict and inflexible. Their classes flourished best with some organized chaos. In other words, be yourself.”—Nancy Flanagan, Michigan

“Call each parent about the first two weeks of school to tell them one specific and positive anecdote about the child. . . . Send home a 5 X 8 card and ask the parent to chat with their child about the child’s goals and parent goals for the child for this school year. Needless to say, they aren’t often the same. Use the card to track phone calls, notes, etc. throughout the year. Great for conference use, too.”—Pat Rossman, Wisconsin

“I have each student complete a ‘student profile’ so I can learn more about each of them as individuals. This profile includes not only information for record keeping and communication purposes but also their likes, dislikes, hobbies, employment experience, why they took my class, what they expect to learn in the class, what grade they expect to achieve in the class, where they have traveled, etc. As they complete each item, I tell them my response to the item so they will learn about me as an individual as well. This activity is a great ‘ice breaker’ and gets the students involved right away.”—Mel Hocking, Ohio

“I have a brightly painted, antique bathtub filled with pillows as a listening, reading and just hanging out with a friend doing ‘tubtime’ spot. I also have a gigantic wicker rocking chair with a homemade afghan for kids to snuggle and read in and also sit with me each day during read aloud. I have a beautiful lop-eared bunny that is litter-trained that provides mega therapy for each of my kids. I have had a variety of classroom pets over the years and feel strongly that it is great therapy for all ages. . . . I play a variety of classical, jazz, tribal [music] as I have a very diverse population. . . . We spend the first 15 minutes of each day with all three third grades singing with sign language. I also have my students submit floor plans each quarter for their desk arrangements and then we vote as a class for that quarter’s setups. I have had some really nifty setups! These are all pretty simplistic things but they seem to help me satisfy my students’ needs for love, belonging, power and fun!”—Julie Ashworth, South Dakota

“Love them enough to risk their not liking you. Children must know that there are consequences to be suffered when they are not nice. . . . Classroom management how-to . . . just ask. Seek help. Always question us veteran teachers and we will find the answers together.”—Carol Avila, Rhode Island

“Everyday I find a way to tell the kids how much I love to teach, sometimes by saying just that, sometimes by saying how I’d rather be with them more than anywhere else. They know I mean it.”—Vicki Matthews–Burwell, Idaho

Final Thoughts and Additional Resources

How to learn more about teaching

For more information about first-year teaching or how to become a teacher, please consult the following resources:

- For general information, Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. (RNT) is a national nonprofit organization that helps people find out what it takes to become a teacher. If you call the RTN ‘helpline’ at 1-800-45-TEACH, or visit their Website at <http://www.rnt.org>, you can:
 - ≥ Acquire a free brochure, *What it Takes to Teach*, which offers a brief introduction to teaching careers;
 - ≥ Order the *Careers in Teaching Handbook*, a comprehensive guide available for those seriously considering the teaching profession, including state-by-state information on education programs and certification requirements; and
 - ≥ Get answers to questions on financial aid, opportunities for teachers of color, and where to go for more information.
- For information on what your state requires for teacher certification, call your state’s education department.
- Call colleges and universities in your area to learn more about teacher preparation.
- For leads and a list of resources on involving families in education and the schools, visit Website <http://www.ed.gov/PFIE/edpub.html>. The brochures, booklets, and publications listed were developed by the U.S. Department of Education and the Partnership for Family Involvement.

A Checklist of Tips

The following tips are drawn from the advice given by first-year and veteran teachers. To read more about these suggestions in detail, see the sections “Tips and Strategies from First-Year Teachers” and “Veteran Teachers Talk” of this booklet.

1. Plan relentlessly: Create back-up plans and plans for teaching students of varying abilities.
2. Set high, consistently reinforced expectations for behavior and academic performance.
3. Show and require respect in the classroom at all times.
4. Reach out to parents and your administration, preferably early on and *before* a problem arises.
5. Consider participating in an extracurricular activity, which strengthens relationships with students and can be enjoyable as well.
6. Seek mentors, team teaching assignments, and regular exchanges with fellow first-year teachers.
7. Be flexible and ready for surprises: For example, one teacher was assigned a classroom of students from kindergarten through fourth grade.
8. Work closely with counselors or other school personnel authorized to respond to children’s social problems.
9. Take care of yourself physically and spiritually.
10. Love learning, love kids, and love teaching!

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Fifth grade inclusive

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