

# 42<sup>TM</sup> Rules

*for Elementary  
School Teachers*

SUSAN GUERRERO





# **42 Rules for Elementary School Teachers**

**Susan Guerrero**



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## Endorsements

*"This book of rules would make Dr. Phil smile. The precise, practical and child centered volume is perfect for the new teacher. By incorporating research, common sense and big doses of humor, this quick and dirty read should be on every new teachers' (and veteran teachers' as well) professional library shelf."*

**Dr. Michael O'Laughlin, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, Union School District, San Jose, CA**

*"Susan Guerrero's '42 Rules of Elementary School Teachers' honors the reasons why young people go into teaching and affirms the best instincts of those who have been in the trenches for decades. She reminds us of the power of a teacher's perception and model to support the courage and joy of learning. Two examples are Rule 29: 'Recognize Every Student is Gifted and Talented' and Rule 33: 'Laugh Every Day.' The small, poignant stories that Guerrero tells of her students and colleagues roots her rules in reality, heart and hope."*

**Laurie Marshall, Teacher, Novato Charter School, Novato, CA.**

*"This is 'teacher talk' at its best from an educator who has experienced the full spectrum of teaching, learning, reform and accountability. What the Wongs do for 'The First Days of School,' Susan illuminates for the days before you begin teaching, the times you struggle to continue and all the days in between. A true celebration of real teachers, their experiences and best practices '42 Rules for Elementary School Teachers' is a gem."*

**Lourdes Desai, Director of Special Education and Categorical Programs, Burlingame (CA) School District**

*"I highly recommend '42 Rules for Elementary School Teachers.' Susan Guerrero's concise, clear writing, questioning techniques, and key strategies for taking active steps for reaching success as a teacher is a "must read" for all educators. I will use this book in my own practice daily."*

**Carol Viegelmann, John F. Kennedy Elementary School Principal, Retired Newark Unified School District Child Care Coordinator (CA)**



## **Dedication**

To my first, best teachers: my parents Robert and Adela Cook. Thank you for a lifetime of love and support built on the foundation of courage, will, and integrity that each of you modeled for me daily. Also to my children Camille, Simone, Nicole, and Chase who make my life a complete joy. Your love and encouragement are everything and I am grateful I am your mother.

## Acknowledgments

I have been blessed to have the support of family, friends, mentors, and colleagues.

Thank you to my sister Bonnie Morgan for being a great example of a strong, capable woman leader, mother, and lifelong learner. Thank you also to my niece Shannon Gerlach and her husband Tom Gerlach who teach with heart, soul, and integrity. You are the third generation and bring your own unique talents and abilities to the task of helping shape our present students and future leaders.

Thank you to my friend Susan Condio-Hernandez, an amazing educator whose friendship, ethics, and example continually inspire me and also challenge me to keep learning and growing both personally and professionally. The world and its children are better because you live to serve and do so with humility, grace, and love.

Thank you to my mentors: Nancy Vincler, Patricia Hoke, and Kenneth Stange who always believed in me and offered advice, wise words, and informed actions. I am deeply grateful to you for sharing your knowledge, support, and examples of excellence.

Thank you to Mardell Kiesel and Dr. Keith Taton of the Anchorage Unified School District and former Newark Unified School District Superintendent Kenneth Sherer. I appreciate the opportunities each of you provided me with to become a learning leader and school administrator. I am deeply grateful to each of you for your confidence and trust in my abilities and your expertise as teachers, learning leaders, and administrators generous enough to mentor and develop others. Each of you offered a model for creative and reflective practices that inspired me at critical points in my development as an educator and that continue to resonate with me today.

To my many colleagues who teach and lead learning in classrooms thank you, thank you, thank you for choosing to make a difference daily in the lives of children.

I also want to thank those that made sure my vision of a book became a reality:

Mitchell Levy my publisher and Laura Lowell my editor and friend have my sincere appreciation.



One gave me the opportunity to write about the profession I love and the other made sure I did it.

In memory of Robert D. Cook Jr. whose passion for reaching, teaching, and connecting was the result of a deep love of learning. I hear your voice daily urging me to continue to live, learn and love with an eye out for the time bandits. Thank you for the greatest lesson of all.

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## Intro

I am proud to be a teacher. No matter what title in education I hold or what position I take I am a teacher and as such I am also a learner. I wrote this book to celebrate some of the things I've been lucky enough to learn through experience or from interactions with great teachers.

The most important people in my life have all been teachers. I have loved teachers from a young age. This started with my parents who were not only my first and best teachers but who have always been models for educational and personal excellence. As the first members of their respective families to finish high school, go to college, and receive advanced degrees they took pride in their accomplishments. My mother and father conveyed the joy of learning and a deep commitment to growth and service. As reflective and caring parents and educators their life example was my first introduction to best practices in teaching and learning. Their example continues to be a measure by which I evaluate myself as a person and as an educator.

The teachers I grew up with were also phenomenal. Maybe I was lucky but I had really great teachers who worked very hard to make learning interesting, relevant, fun, and accessible. I did not always appreciate them completely and quite honestly at times they did not always appreciate me. Kids can be difficult and I was certainly no exception. In the polite acronym of local educators I could be a real PITA, which stands for "pain in the ass." My teachers however were endlessly patient and completely amazing and with each year that passes I have an ever-deepening respect for them. Teachers really do change lives and my life has been changed by every teacher I have known.

Some of the teachers that changed my life and the lives of countless children including my own are

celebrated in this book. Teachers like 1st grade teacher Anita Sanchez and 5th grade teacher Joe Romagna from Pleasanton Unified School District are outstanding teachers I have experienced as a parent whose child was transformed by their thoughtful and loving practices. Many of the other teachers cited are friends and colleagues that I had the privilege of working with as a teacher or as a school site administrator. Although moving from teaching to school administration is sometimes seen as a shift to the dark side I feel that making the move gave me a unique opportunity. As a teacher I was able to personally live and learn from engaging in my experiences and as an administrator I was able to observe and learn from an array of amazing teachers at all levels of experience. I am so grateful for having had this opportunity.

The rules in this book are not mandates; they are reflections on best practices that I have seen succeed. As sharing is part of the elementary school experience I want to share with each of you. I hope that you will enjoy reading these 42 “rules” and that they will resonate with you in the same way that they touched me.

Please share these rules with friends and colleagues and also feel free to contact me to share your own best practices. The more we all collaborate, the better we all become for ourselves and the communities we serve.



## 1

## Rules Are Meant to Be Broken

**Rules can be changed, challenged, deconstructed and reinvented.**

I've spent much of my life in the principal's office first as a student and then as an educator. As a student, I was in the principal's office due to an inability to follow the rules of protocol. There was the time I was so disruptive my teacher announced "Fine, you teach class!" I rose to her challenge by standing up and calmly saying: "Class is dismissed." My announcement was greeted with resounding glee and a mass exit of students.

Years later my teacher had left the classroom to become the Dean of the Education Department at the University I was applying to as a teaching intern. At my entrance interview I had the opportunity to apologize for my youthful rebellion. I needed to get into the program to keep a teaching job I had been hired for at the last minute. I had never taught in a classroom but as a graduate student was deemed qualified to teach in an inner city district where the shortage of teachers severely impacted the community.

"You look familiar," my former teacher queried as I sat trying to look like a professional teaching candidate. "I should," I finally replied "I used to be one of your students and I wasn't always well behaved. You'll be happy to know I now have ten students in my 6th grade class who are worse. Also, I'm teaching in an inner city school where teachers regularly quit before lunch each day. First, I'd like to apologize for being a brat and second, I'd like to make it up to you by becoming the best teacher I can."



I spent the next 2 years working in a community challenged by poverty, gangs and absenteeism. I did become the best teacher I could by working with the community, making home visits, planning and delivering differentiated instruction for a full range of learners. My students included those who spoke no English and had never been in school, students left behind a year or two, to the rare gifted student. It wasn't until years later that I could acknowledge that my best at the time wasn't nearly good enough. I actually thought I had more to teach than to learn.

In those first years of teaching I spent a great deal of time in the principal's office hearing how I needed to be like the other teachers. Apparently I still suffered from an inability to follow accepted norms. The unwritten rule was to just "Go with the flow." I was supposed to "Go along to get along." Never mind actually teaching anything. It was clear that TEAM meant Together Everyone Accepts Mediocrity. I didn't quit at lunch time however. I only left after 2 years of working 7 days a week morning till midnight teaching all day and going to school at night while raising triplets as a single mother. By that time I had a teaching credential and was just beginning to realize I had a lot left to learn.

It seems fitting I'm now on the other side of the desk listening to children tell me why they break rules while I work with teachers to put effective systems in place. My journey to this point has been marked by making and breaking rules and learning from the process. I have had many roles as an educator each one challenging me with real and unwritten rules. Some of them were reasonable and others were ridiculous.

As an educator, I'm professionally and ethically bound by rules that cannot simply be broken. They can however be changed, challenged, deconstructed and reinvented. I'm still a rebel but my cause isn't anarchy it's continual improvement. Remember evolution is not revolution it is reinvention. This applies to rules and to all of life.

## 2

## Teaching Is All About Learning

**The passion for teaching must be a passion for learning. It is work of the heart as well as the mind.**

How did someone like me end up an educator with a book on the rules of teaching and learning? It's really only natural. I have always been a student and even now at the ripe age of 92 (If you count principal years like dog years), I am still a student both formally and informally. I study the schools I'm at, attend classes and academies, participate in on-line learning, forums and pod casts and go to conferences. I learn from students, parents, teachers and colleagues. I have an open heart, open hand and open door.

Being fully open to learning allows you to be an expert teacher because you will continue to grow, change and evolve as a person. This quality allows you to reflect on and improve your practices but it's not as easy as it sounds. To truly be a learner it's necessary to examine yourself, your ideas, theories and practices. It's important to recognize that if you're a learner you don't know everything, can't know everything and need to critically question what you think you know and what you actually already do.

The passion for teaching must be a passion for learning. It is work of the heart as well as the mind. This is what I call open heart and open hand learning. An open heart desires expansion, change, growth. A flat open palm can receive or release. It does not grasp, hold on to or close itself off to possibilities or ideas. When these two things include an open door whether it is a metaphorical

door or an actual door you can create the best conditions for your learning and thus the learning of others.

Your real learning begins when you are teaching in your own classroom. Academic programs prepare you with theory but your own classroom is reality. It's one of the reasons reality shows have captured the imagination of the masses. There isn't anything more compelling than a real life drama. There is no script but there are strategies. Successful strategies include that you:

- Learn about your school's history, mission and future vision
- Know your community: parents and guardians, students, colleagues and support systems
- Understand how to collaborate with everyone and add value through your unique contributions
- Integrate standards, the approved curriculum and the best methods for teaching
- Embrace training and action research opportunities
- Reflect on what's working and what needs improvement or change

The best teachers are students of learning who constantly search for answers to every individual situation that presents itself concerning helping students to succeed. Decide now to take complete responsibility for every student you serve. This means you don't get to make excuses. You can't blame students or their circumstances. You must fully commit to every child's success.

I wish someone had told me this when I first started teaching. When I think back on my first year class I'm embarrassed to think about how badly I failed some of my students. There was one child in particular that received several F's. Would you believe in that first year I thought he was the one that failed? It wasn't until later, when I had more experience and training that I could reflect back and admit I had not taken full responsibility. I was under the impression that because I taught something, my student should have learned it. I had not yet reached a point where I evaluated myself and my teaching based on my students' achievement results. Instead I evaluated the student, found him wanting and gave him the grade that he "deserved." I should have given myself an F.

Promise yourself to keep searching, learning and growing. Be better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of being an effective learning leader by constantly examining and reflecting on your practices. Celebrate your success and admit and learn from your failures.

## 3

## Ask Important Questions

**Asking questions about what we're doing and why we're doing it is vital to having a reflective and effective teaching practice.**

You may have heard there are no stupid questions. There are however some less than stellar answers:

- Because I said so!
- We've always done it like this.
- It's been this way forever.
- Why shouldn't I make it easier on myself?

These are actual responses to important questions like:

- Why are we using outdated materials that have no relationship to grade level standards?
- How come we're doing a penguin unit instead of using the State approved ELA adoption?
- Does it make sense to you that we don't have a pacing schedule or clear benchmarks?
- Is it reasonable to use 40 min of instructional math time today to correct the fifty independent practice problems done yesterday?

You may be thinking, "Well, of course, you're asking those questions. You're the principal." Except, I was asking the same questions as a teacher. Asking questions about what we're doing and why we're doing it is vital to having a reflective and effective teaching practice.

I'll admit, I didn't always ask diplomatically but it wasn't out of malice. I really wanted to know. Now I realize I could have gotten better answers if I had approached asking questions more carefully:

- What standards-based resources are available for our use and if there aren't any have we addressed this in our school site plan?
- How can we incorporate the creative unit work you've done in the past with the State approved ELA adoption we've all been given to use?
- What process has the team gone through to develop clear pacing guides and effective assessments and how can we improve on the process this year?
- How can we each use the lesson pacing guides and quick check assessments in Math that publishers added to the new adoptions to make sure instructional time is well utilized?

Your questions will depend on your circumstances however in all schools there are some key questions that can be asked and answered together:

- What are the core values we collectively believe and support in our practice?
- How are these conveyed in our school?
- What is our mission statement and how often do we update it?
- What can we learn from closely examining data to better serve our students?
- Did we meet the goals outlined in last year's school site plan and how can we learn from our successes and/or identified areas of improvement?
- What are the norms we can agree on to ensure the best use of meeting and collaboration time?
- What's the best way for us to collaborate on our school site plan to better know and understand our academic, social emotional and safety goals, strategies, targets, resources and budget decisions?
- How can we work together to ensure best practices and continuous improvement?
- What systems can we put in place to make thoughtful, timely and collaborative decisions?
- What can we each do to promote proactive and positive change?

At this point you may be asking why we are looking at site-based questions. Good, I've already got you asking important questions. The above questions are essential to defining the learning community you are a part of and having the answers to these questions, sets clear goals, processes and guidelines that will allow you to focus on teaching so students can succeed at learning.

## 4

**Meet, Greet, Remember and Repeat**

**When you meet someone follow the process of being fully present for the introduction...**

You're not even in your classroom yet. You've just been hired and everything and everyone is new. Take notes. No really, I mean it. When you meet someone follow the process of being fully present for the introduction, greeting them by name following the meeting, locking the name and face into memory and repeating their name as you are leaving. You're going to be meeting a lot of new people. You need to know who they are, what they do and how they can and do affect you.

It's easy to be overwhelmed when you're first hired to teach or when you've joined a new team. First impressions are very important and often the last thing a new educator is thinking about is the people who are running things. I'm not suggesting you get in tight with everyone you meet but acknowledging people by name, knowing who to go to when you have a need and how to approach them appropriately is crucial to having and maintaining successful support systems and great personal and professional relationships.

Many districts will have an orientation for new hires and may even have a tour where they will take you through the departments and introduce you to staff. Use the opportunity to begin establishing a relationship or at least a knowledge base. Make it a point to make a meaningful connection even if it is just to say "It was nice to meet you \_\_\_\_\_. Have a great day." No one who works on the front lines of a school district ever gets too many pleasant contacts. Be memorable by being positive and

appreciative. Start the relationship cordially, maintain it with courtesy and you will become someone people like to see coming rather than someone they celebrate leaving.

There are often organizational charts available as handouts or on district websites that give the names and titles of different key staff members. The really helpful ones also have pictures. Use these to integrate who you have met into your consciousness so you can greet them by name the next time you see them. Everyone appreciates being acknowledged and remembered.

At your site do the same thing and observe the people you meet to identify key cultural leaders. The given members of this group are your direct supervisor, the office manager and the custodian. Treat all of them respectfully. Each deals with garbage, complaints, facility issues, students, parents, teachers and other managers and supervisors.

Ask for a staff group photo or a leftover yearbook to help you remember the names of your new colleagues. If you've already met them the pictures will help you remember names and if you haven't yet met them approaching a colleague by name and introducing yourself shows you care and want to be part of their team. Even though you may or may not be the only new hire make it easy for your colleagues to remember your name by reintroducing yourself whenever necessary. I am always grateful when someone says "Hi, Susan, It's \_\_\_\_\_ we met last week. It's good to see you again." The impression you leave by doing this is that of a supportive colleague who cares about other people. It costs nothing and pays off in establishing you as a great new addition to the team.

When I moved to Alaska earlier in my career being socially forward helped me enormously. As a native Californian I was feeling out of place in "America's Last Frontier." I didn't know anyone, was 3 months pregnant and feeling sick. It was an effort to turn on the charm. I visited each of my colleagues to personally introduce myself and committed to having as many positive interactions as possible with each one. My colleagues quickly made me a part of their learning family. If you, meet, greet, remember and repeat you will become known and valued in no time at all.

## 5

## Read Your Contract

**I'm telling you to read your contract because you need to know and understand the mutual agreements in it and be as responsible for the good faith it represents as you will want others to be.**

I recently asked ten teachers if they knew their contract. Each teacher told me that they knew all their rights. When asked more specifically if they had ever read their contract not one teacher actually had read it all the way through and in some cases some teachers hadn't read it at all.

Please sit down and read your contract. I don't suggest this because anyone will intentionally violate your rights or mistakenly give you bad advice about how to handle yourself professionally should issues arise. I'm telling you to read your contract because you need to know and understand the mutual agreements in it and be as responsible for the good faith it represents as you will want others to be.

When you read your contract do it actively using meta-cognitive strategies such as questioning, summarizing and thinking aloud to process through the different sections so you fully understand them. I'm not being insulting telling you to think about what you are reading it's just that it is very easy to interpret contract language incorrectly or misinterpret it purposefully depending on your motives and the motives of others.

As an administrator I tell my teachers to read their contract. I want them to know their rights and I want our relationship to acknowledge I will never knowingly or purposefully violate their rights and that I expect the same consideration in return. I let teachers know that they need to read the contract



carefully because I have read it and reread it, questioned it and clarified it in order to honor it.

Do not be lazy and let someone else interpret your contract for you as that could cause you and your district or school no end of trouble. If you are a new teacher you especially want to know your rights as you may be designated as temporary or probationary depending on the staffing needs of the district you were employed by when you were hired. These designations have different contract provisions and you need to know them.

I have seen teachers trust representatives to tell them their rights without actually researching their unit member's individual status and the implications for them personally. Representatives are tenured and their rights are not the same as some of the teachers they advise. These representatives are not personnel experts and also don't necessarily know or understand temporary or probationary status, seniority or other important considerations. Be your own best advocate and know what your status is and the rights and responsibilities connected to it.

Don't be afraid to ask questions regarding your contract and make sure you ask the right people the right questions. If you're new you want to know the bottom line and if you've been a teacher awhile you want to know what you've actually agreed to through your bargaining unit. As an administrator who has no contract, union or basically any protective rights, I can't stress enough how important it is that you read your contract thoroughly, question it thoughtfully and only quote it appropriately.

One year our district was forced to do reductions in work force. Several people who received notice that their positions were being eliminated mounted very public protests that were embarrassing. Protesters made false statement to the press because they didn't understand their actual contract rights. One of these teachers was a personal friend of mine who later found it difficult to find another position. Her anger, disappointment and subsequent difficulties could have been avoided by referring to the contract. Read it. Know it. Honor it.

## 6

## Know Where You're Going

**Choosing to begin a relationship with an educational system is as complex as choosing a life partner.**

One of the most important actions you will take as an educator is hiring a school district. Choosing to begin a relationship with an educational system is as complex as choosing a life partner. Make sure you do it right and go beyond the surface. We all want the district we choose to be attractive, have a good reputation and be fiscally sound but the most important thing is that it has essential core values that you can live with, grow from and evolve within. You don't just want a good match; you want a great one, one that might just last a lifetime.

So, where do you go to find your perfect match? The short answer is the internet. The longer response is to seek introductions through friends and colleagues, frequent job fairs, utilize program mentors, alumni connections and student teaching placements. Once you know where to look you need to define what you truly want in a district by asking yourself:

- What essential core values do I want to find a match for?
- Which of these values are central to my professional advocacy
- What am I passionate about?

Look for your essential core qualities in your placement. Be picky! Make inquiries about the districts you're considering, talk to people who work there, visit in person if possible and definitely visit virtually through internet searches of district and school websites. Find out everything you can about where

you believe you want to be. I learned this from one of the best mentors I've ever had, my mother.

My mother was an educator for over 20 years and during that time I saw her grow and change personally and professionally by not just thinking outside the box but by acting outside of it as well. When she went out to find a professional match she got in her car, drove through the communities she sought to join, talked to current workers and asked community members about their impressions. Her desire to interact came before the advent of the internet. Luckily you can do both and can use personal and professional connections to narrow the search.

Look at the schools and districts you're considering very carefully. Read and know their mission statements, pour over their posted plans, examine their programs for professional development. Research the challenges they face and the successes they've achieved and know their important growth statistics over time. Don't go to job fairs and get in the line that has the most applicants. Popular school districts are just like the most popular kids in high school everyone knows them, they may be popular for reasons that don't necessarily coincide with your values and they may not be a realistic match. If they are great however be open to others especially if they come looking for you.

As a recruiter, I don't wait inside job fairs for teaching candidates; I go outside to where the line is waiting to get in. I ask people what they're looking for and invite them to see what I have to offer. Look for the districts that do this because they want you to work for them. Their desire will translate into creating systems that support you. When you find these matches interview them to know what they have to offer. Ask about their support programs for beginning and transition teachers, the training they provide, the growth opportunities that exist. Ask for a tour or visit and before going research the sites you plan to see. Don't imagine they are hiring you. You are choosing them and to choose well you need to know where you're going and whether you want to remain there. If you haven't done this and already have a job do the research anyway as you need to know everything about your partner in education so you will have a mutually satisfying and successful long-term relationship.

## 7

## Establish Relationships

**Although you may feel you have a lot of students, remember each of them is the most important person in your classroom to their parents.**

Relationships are central to teaching and learning. Establishing a real relationship with every student, their parents, your colleagues and supervisor is the foundation for a successful learning partnership that will make teaching a joy.

Do you remember a teacher who connected with you as an individual? Maybe they took the time to listen, find out about your interests and give you opportunities to incorporate your passions into your learning. I bet those teachers were your favorite people and that because of it you worked harder to succeed in school.

To establish yourself as an important learning leader to your students take the time to get to know them. Since you're the adult be a "roll" model and get the ball rolling by sending out introductory letters or postcards to students before the year begins. Tell them who you are, what your interests are and how exciting it is that you will be working together. Gear your communications appropriately for your grade level. Do a quick welcome to school postcard for Kindergarten, adding information as you move up in grades and even moving to cards or a letter for upper grades. Be prepared to get mail back and when you do, answer it!

Writing back and forth is a great way to have a private dialogue that lets students know they are valued. This can be carried on throughout the year in different forms such as continued correspondence, e-mail, student learning reflections and teacher validation or two-way journals.

Although you may feel like you have a lot of students remember each of them is the most important person in your classroom to their parents. As you are getting to know students and their parents make sure you are sharing who you are with them. Be visible and available before and after school and use every opportunity to share your commitment and vision for learning. Unless you are in a job share situation, each of your students only has one teacher and they want to know who you are, what you stand for and what to expect from you. If you start out letting everyone get to know you, you can't fail to succeed with students and get their parents to support you.

I experienced a master at work one year when I went to my son Chase's Back to School Night. The teacher, Anita Sanchez met each parent at the door with a gracious handshake and welcome. Her beautiful classroom was set up for each of us to sign in and find our child's desk which had the 1st grade standards, class policies and procedures and a note from each child on it.

Mrs. Sanchez got up in front of the class, smiled at everyone and began a power point presentation by saying:

"I'd like to share the twenty reasons I love getting up and coming in to teach each day."

The slides showing every child in the class experiencing their first week of first grade made every parent sigh and fall in love with Mrs. Sanchez. With one graceful action she conveyed how she felt about our kids, shared what their activities and learning looked like in action and she showed us that she valued each and every one of them.

As you're connecting with students and parents make sure you also spend quality time with your teaching partners and talk with your supervisor regularly. Ask for feedback and be prepared to actually listen to it and use it. Offer your opinion when asked and practice diplomacy.

It's easy to get super involved in your classroom and forget that you are part of a larger learning community. Tend to each part of your learning community by making sure you know and understand your students, parents, colleagues and supervisor. Your work to create relationships will result in positive relationships that sustain and enrich you and your teaching.

## 8

## Dress Professionally

**Your students look up to you as a role model and life guide and they really like to see you looking good.**

You can't ever go wrong looking like a professional educator. It might even help you become a better one. This is a tricky subject to bring up as let's face it if you're doing a great job of teaching why should it matter what you wear? Guess what? It matters to the kids. Your students look up to you as a role model and life guide and they really like to see you looking good. One of my fondest memories as a child was watching my handsome father, a three-time "Teacher of the Year" nominee, getting ready for work. He shaved every day, slicked back his dark hair and donned a suit and tie. It didn't matter that he taught third grade and might get dirty, he looked like a million bucks and people appreciated the effort. He looked like a professional and he was treated like one by students, parents and colleagues.

I took my father's example to heart when I started my first teaching job. I had been hired late on a Friday afternoon to start teaching the following Monday morning. I had not been through a teacher's training program or taught in a classroom. I needed a job and the school needed teachers. Apparently they needed them so badly that they'd even take me with my Master's Degree in English and zero teaching experience. I thought I should at least look like a teacher so I applied a little make up, put on a skirt and blazer, pinned up my long hair and wore my best smile.

Just looking like a professional helped me to meet my first class with an air of confidence I did not feel.

As a single parent of triplets on welfare I had only completed my education through a miracle of will and family support. As a daughter of teachers I hadn't ever planned on being a teacher because I knew intimately how hard it is to teach. I had listened to "teacher talk" around the dinner table throughout my childhood. "What am I doing," I thought but I could hear the murmurs as I walked to class:

"That's the new teacher."

"She looks like she knows what's what."

"It's about time they got a real teacher."

"Okay," I told myself. "People think I'm the real deal. I can do this." Somehow by dressing as a professional, I set up an expectation that led my students, their parents and my colleagues to believe I actually knew what I was doing. I also started and completed a credential program at night during my first 2 years of full time teaching so I'd have the skills to be a good teacher.

You probably have the advantage of actually having a credential already. Maybe you've even been teaching for years. That gives you every reason to present yourself professionally. You have worked long and hard to be a professional educator and your work involves taking care of others. Now you need to take care of yourself. Be well groomed and dressed with care. Show your students you value yourself enough to take the time to look good. Remember students are looking at you all day and your presence and appearance defines for them what a teacher is. You are their teacher and they like to be proud of you.

I found out how memorable a professionally dressed teacher is when I did my student teaching to complete my credential. By chance, I was assigned to the school my father had retired from. Somehow word got out that I was Robert Cook's daughter. When I walked in on the first day in a dress suit and heels, the grandparents and parents of my students greeted me.

"You must be Mr. Cook's daughter, you look just like him. I remember how great he dressed. He was the best."

## 9

**Be Professional**

**Every moment you are in the presence of your students you are teaching them through your example.**

As a role model to your class you have to be prepared, proactive, positive and have a clear plan for leading every student to success. You also have to create, maintain and nurture a great home/school connection with parents and guardians, collegial and collaborative partnerships with grade level partners and other colleagues including your supervisor.

How do you do this? Try utilizing some norms that students are often asked to use in interactions:

- Be open, honest and kind
- Assume positive intent
- Act with positive intentions

Although these strategies are stated positively each can also be a directive to avoid:

- Gossiping, speaking negatively of students, parents, other teachers or your administrator
- Assuming purposeful negative behavior
- Reacting to issues or situations negatively

There is no place in a professional learning culture for gossip and trash talking. The negativity it causes hurts everyone. Students are especially sensitive to both real and perceived slights from their teachers. Sarcasm is especially deadly and shouldn't occur in class. An off-hand remark can ruin a child's whole day and consistent use can cause serious emotional issues.

I maintain an open door policy for students to come to my office when they need to talk. It would surprise you to hear what they sometimes have to say



about what's going on in classes or remarks that are made. While you are teaching State standards to your class, students are holding you accountable to standards of behavior based on what they think is fair, right and reasonable. Every moment you're in the presence of your students you are teaching them through your example.

Imagine every student in your class is Sponge Bob or Roberta Square Pants. Know that each student is soaking up every spoken thought and witnessed action. All eyes are on you at all times. You have to be impeccable. This is true on the playground and in the Teacher's Lounge as well. Parents notice who is on duty and whether they are watching the kids or chatting with another teacher. Teachers often want to take a real break at recess or lunch and find they can't do it in the Teacher's Lounge because it has been turned into a whine bar. Don't become part of "Unhappy Hour" at lunch.

You've probably heard of "The Golden Rule." which basically means "Treat others the way you want to be treated." You will want to upgrade this to platinum by instead treating others the way they want and need to be treated. Although on a basic level being fair, consistent, caring and helpful will work for students, parents and colleagues remember that each has different wants and needs.

Students want to learn and all need an approach that will work for them. Don't believe students who say they don't care. Their words are often a cover for insecurity. Your commitment to earning and honoring their trust through your professionalism is key to your students succeeding. They need to believe in you and know that you have faith in them.

Parents want to know their children are getting a good education and need help in understanding how they can support them. Provide a professional ear and give advice to help parents support students at home. Let them know how you can help each other.

Colleagues want to collaborate and sometimes may need to commiserate as well. Make it a point not to dwell on the negative especially in the teacher's lounge during break times. Suggest scheduling time in a grade level meeting to discuss student issues and make it a point to also share the successes. Focus on student data and avoid getting into personal opinions. Remember every student is someone's child and imagine their parents are in the room when you are discussing them.

## 10

**Create a Beautiful and Cohesive Classroom**

**You want your students to feel a surge of joy when they come into your classroom. A feeling of comfort and belonging should come over them.**

Do you love an organized and efficient setting that is also beautiful and functional? Students do, especially the ones that need a cohesive system to help support their learning. You spend all day in your room and so do your students. If it isn't clean, well set up and gorgeous you are all missing out.

When I entered my first classroom it was almost completely empty, with peeling paint, a few rickety tables and a teacher's desk from another era. The emptiness was overwhelming and knowing that I only had a day to set up the room I wasted no time and promptly had a mini breakdown. When I recovered, the first thing I did was throw out the teacher's desk. I knew that teaching 6th grade I was never going to get to sit down and besides the desk was ugly. If you have a beautiful desk or you feel you need one, set it up so it doesn't separate you from students. Your desk should be well organized and clean with everything in place, a work station example for students.

After throwing the desk out I looked around the room and thought, "Now what?" Luckily, as a student I had always had amazing teachers and as a child I had grown up with full access to the best teachers around, my parents. I took a minute to visualize what had worked for me when I was in school and what I wanted my students to experience when they entered our class. I also called my mom crying and yelled "Help," into the phone.

Ask someone for help if you need it. Most people are happy to come to your aid. Take a little walk

through other classrooms to give you a concrete visual or even do a diagram to plan out your room before beginning.

You want your students to feel a surge of joy when they come into your classroom. A feeling of comfort and belonging should come over them. There needs to also be a clear visual message conveyed of high expectations regarding meeting academic and behavioral standards. To do this you have to define your shared space from each student's desk to class centers and materials. Everything has to be set up with purpose so materials are easy to access, everyone can move through and work within the class flexibly and you can maintain great classroom management.

Begin with a "naked" room. Strip the walls and throw everything away. Students are going to be coming into the room to get their first glimpse of their home away from home for the year. You don't want to let them see hand me down faded paper from the year before on the walls or even fadeless paper, bright and full of pin holes from past student work. Since you don't have the same class each year, don't present the same classroom. A great trick is to use fabric to cover the walls and bulletin boards. Fabric can hold several displays without looking like it's been shot full of tiny holes. You can define your areas by using different colors.

After you initially dress the walls and separate displays and work areas with color spend time creating a door welcome by posting students' names and if available their photo or a die cut for a future photo. All rooms benefit from certain specifically defined areas such as: communication boards, calendar and agenda areas, posted standards, core curriculum and creative work displays and divided areas to show ongoing work samples for each student. Finally, set up student desks so that students are able to work together and you can move through rows or tables easily. Walk through the room and sit in the various desks to test visibility for students during instruction and see how the room will look through their eyes.

## P. R. E. P. for Success

**It's important to engage in examining student data systematically, unemotionally and with a clear focus.**

Prep period! Hooray, a little time to prepare for the twenty to thirty or more students you face each day. That's not what we'll be talking about here. P. R. E. P. in this context is an acronym for:

- **Profile** each student by analyzing all available data.
- **Research** any identified special needs.
- **Extend** yourself: collaborate with students' previous teachers including specialists.
- **Plan** comprehensively for each student and the class by utilizing your complete set of profiles.

You P. R. E. P. prior to the beginning of school. It happens before students ever enter your classroom. It's the information introduction to your students individually and as a collective class team. The data you gather and examine will be used to help you understand:

- Current student proficiencies and/or baseline information.
- The ranges of students.
- Special needs and possible supports that need to be addressed.
- The starting point for goal setting for the year.

I won't lie to you, when I first presented the idea of P. R. E. P. for success to staff members they looked like they wanted to beat me to death with the school P. E. equipment. "Don't you think we look at student information?" "How insulting can you get?" "We're professionals!"

The reality is I know how hard teachers work and I admire their dedication which is why asking teachers to P. R. E. P. is an acknowledgment of the difficult job they do as professional educators. It's important to engage in examining student data systematically, unemotionally and with a clear focus. In doing so, you can identify the starting proficiency for each student and the ranges within the class. This will help you pinpoint how to better set up your classroom to support individuals, groups and the class as a whole. When done across a school it can provide a great tool for strategically raising test scores.

Doing a student profile is based on facts that can be accessed in student records. Prior report cards and behavior reports or commendations, site and district benchmark assessments and standardized test scores as well as placement tests, CELDT information, SST documentation and IEPs will help you get an idea of your students' capabilities and ranges of learning. In addition, any designations such as ELL or GATE can be utilized to further define the ranges of students that can be helpful in grouping and planning for instruction.

With students who have special needs, meet with the Resource Specialist and discuss the specific learning challenges for each student. Make sure to read their IEP or 504 Plan and ask questions about whether there is a need for preferred seating due to sight, hearing, behavior or other identified issues. Since the Resource Specialist works intimately with select students they often know students really well and have keen insight into how to support them in the regular classroom. Honor their expertise by seeking out their advice and collaborating with them on an ongoing basis.

Use the information you gather about your students to set up seating arrangements that will support individuals, provide balance for groups and address any known issues. A method I find helpful is to use colored post-its with student names to designate the different ability ranges. I also code these ELL, GATE, RSP and 504 in order to keep in mind having a mix of ranges and specific needs in student groupings. The post-its make an easily manipulated seating chart when you are planning and can be transferred to a computer when you finalize it.

You can begin planning how to differentiate for your class once you've completed the P. R. E. P. process. The process itself is meant to be proactive and positive. It's important to remember that raw data doesn't reveal the actuality of each individual. The reality of your actual students may completely contradict your profile but if it does that's an important discovery that will also help you move forward.

## 12

## Use Data Analysis

**Discovering and digging through data is a terrific start to addressing the needs of your students.**

Discovering and digging through data is a terrific start to addressing the needs of your students. Once you've examined their past and done an initial profile you can better determine their future progress as learners. If this is not your first year in teaching you will also want to review and analyze how your previous class performed as well. Take a look at final report cards, all benchmark assessments, and standardized test scores for your class and grade level to examine the impact your instruction had on students. You can also see how collaboration may or may not have supported proficiency rates for your grade level.

Each year I receive a stack of sealed test scores to distribute to every teacher who was involved in the previous year's testing. There always seems to be a concern that the measure of how a class and/or grade level did will have negative evaluative consequences for a single teacher or set of teachers. This creates an unfortunate fear of openly looking at data.

The information is for your use to let you know how your kids did. It's not really a secret so use it well. Honestly examine and evaluate your practices as a teacher and compare your results with the results of your grade level colleagues. Did you implement a strategy that worked well and could help others achieve similar great results? Did a grade level partner try something that made a positive difference to student performance? Maybe your

entire team collaborated all year to systematically address improving student achievement. How did the group do?

A super third grade team I know used data analysis to collaboratively examine and address areas of teaching and learning strength as well as areas for improvement. Each teacher analyzed their classroom's performance in relationship to their personal practices. The group then compared notes and identified where they had succeeded as a team and how they could still improve. Their data analysis pointed out clear areas where one or more teachers had significant gains and also areas where the grade level needed to really pull together.

The team then planned how they would each use the data to inform their personal classroom instruction as well as what they would do as a grade level to refocus on identified areas for improvement. Their collaboration resulted in a year-long plan to improve student performance by regrouping students for classroom rotations that utilized each team member's teaching strengths. The team also honestly examined where each of them needed to build a better capacity for teaching subject areas that were not strengths. Everyone agreed to collaborate on these areas in grade level meetings and use data on an ongoing basis to see how their plan was working. At the end of the year there was clear data showing student gains as well as enhanced teaching strategies.

Another dedicated group of 1st grade teachers followed a similar process but since they didn't have standardized test scores they met with the Kindergarten Team to look at incoming 1st graders, used year end Kindergarten assessments and beginning 1st grade baseline assessments to gather important data on their students. Each teacher then met with every student's parents in the first weeks of school to let parents know where their children were at and where they needed to be by the end of the year.

The 1st grade team added collaborative lunches in a designated teacher's room to discuss data on an ongoing basis. This voluntary action made a huge difference to the culture of each of the participating classrooms and to the home/school connection between the teachers and parents. There was never a moment when the students, parents or teachers were in the dark concerning important data and how it could be used to improve student achievement. Analyzing data is a phenomenal way to grow as a professional educator. Do it!

## 13

**Know and Use the Curriculum**

**Each teacher in every grade level across the school needs to work individually and collectively to provide a well articulated course of instruction that addresses the standards we want our students to master.**

Vision and creativity are great qualities to have as a teacher. They are even better when combined with using the standards based and State approved curriculum. Please don't groan and throw a teacher's edition in frustration. I'm not suggesting that you simply open each book you've been given and follow it without question.

I've worked with a lot of different curriculums and even done action research to develop, write and implement them. You may have too and might bristle at being told: "Here, this is what you need to teach." You may even say "Sure, I'll use that," while thinking, "Fat chance," and leaving the books on a back shelf.

You might also be very well trained in using the current curriculum. Maybe you have used it well seeing the value in a set pacing guide that touches on all the areas students need to reach the standards. You may realize that the research and development of approved materials involved the expertise of many educators such as yourself and that there is a spiral element that provides continued review and practice over time. Perhaps you use the carefully planned lessons and interventions and your students are succeeding but what about the grade below and above you? Is everybody using the curriculum and using it well?

Let me just say it: Please use the standards based, State approved, adoption materials as well as your individual passion, vision and creativity. Each



teacher in every grade level across the school needs to work individually and collectively to provide a well-articulated course of instruction that systematically addresses the standards we want our students to master. If everyone does what they want we get very differing results.

Think of the adoption materials as the rock in a stone soup. It's not a magic stone; it's just a common rock, one ingredient we all have access to. Throwing the rocks at each other is just painful. Filling a pot with just stones is dense, heavy and unappetizing. It's going to take each individual in the whole village to get creative and contribute the special ingredients that only they can provide. Begin with the rock and together build a recipe for successfully nourishing students' minds and souls.

What can you contribute to this process? Your special ingredients include your:

- Knowledge and understanding of your particular students
- Commitment to using standards based materials well
- Advocacy to differentiate the curriculum to provide for the full range of learners
- Individual vision and creativity
- Ability to collaborate for continuous improvement

Begin by going through all your available teacher's editions for each of your core subjects. Familiarize yourself with the set up for each instruction manual and take time to reorganize them if they aren't teacher friendly. This may involve bookmarking or even deconstructing and reordering components to fit your teaching and learning style. You have to make it workable for you.

Explore how well the different lesson-plan components scaffold and differentiate for various student levels and needs. Use them to plan strategic instruction within your class. When you are successful with this, explore how collaborating with your grade level team can help improve instruction.

If you are all using the curriculum you can better collaborate on providing for the full range of learners through strategic teaching, regrouping and rotations within your class, grade level or even across different grade levels. Can special needs students be mainstreamed into the appropriate grade level for their abilities? What about strategically regrouping English Language Learners to receive SDAIE, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English or G.A.T.E. to work on challenge materials?

With so many students, all with differing needs and abilities, a common curriculum foundation will provide an important base for creating a rich, fulfilling and substantial course of instruction. Know your curriculum and use it well.

## 14

## Give a Proper Welcome

**Students don't want to disappoint a teacher who obviously wants to welcome them to learn.**

Have you ever had someone greet you with, "Welcome, welcome, welcome," and the actions that showed they meant it? It's a phenomenal feeling to make that kind of connection and it takes time and effort. If you make sure to give students a proper welcome that conveys the same sense of genuine greeting it will enhance your ability to connect as a teacher. Students don't want to disappoint a teacher who obviously wants to welcome them to learn.

At the beginning of the year, send "Welcome to School" cards or letters to parents and students before school begins. When school starts also provide a visual welcome sign outside your classroom so before students even enter they see that they are indeed welcome. When you open your door, a well thought out door display offers another thoughtful way to greet students. Arrive early so you can open the door and greet everyone calmly and with sincerity.

Welcome students at the beginning of class with a short presentation about yourself personally and your expectations for student behavior and learning. Provide ways for students to ease into the new school year after this initial welcome. Use activities that they can do independently that will also give you information about who they are, how they see themselves and what their special talents or interests may be. At any elementary level self-portraits, writing samples, interest surveys and team builders will give you either concrete and/or observable

information about your students individually and how they can best work together as a team.

To further welcome students schedule a welcome chat with each student in the first week of school. With younger students a brief one-on-one is fine and can be done informally during class as circumstances allow. Older students will need more time and you may want to schedule your chats during an independent work or review activity. Use the information you gathered from self-portraits, interest surveys and other activities to connect with students and find out more about them while you are chatting with them.

In addition to your brief one-on-one chats in the classroom, schedule chats before and after school and meet with parents at the same time. This creates an open, welcoming atmosphere for the year. Welcome chats can be combined with a brief explanation of available student assessment data to give both the students and parents an understanding of where each student is academically. With younger students you can use their baseline assessments and with older students provide an explanation of their standardized test scores. In such cases, a letter home to parents explaining the process and offering a time to meet can be done.

Use the formal welcome chats with students and parents to proactively establish guidelines for your teaching and learning relationship with each family. Make sure to clarify where each student is and the shared work between home and school that will be needed to advance them. For parents who are not available offer to call or e-mail them.

If you are screaming “I don’t have time to do this,” as you’re reading you may want to also yell: “This isn’t in the contract,” or “I don’t get paid to do this.” Go ahead. I can’t hear you. When you’re done please reflect on the following:

- Take a little time now to save an enormous amount of time in the future.
- Contracts generally protect you and allow you to make important teaching choices.
- The choice to be proactive will help you and your students succeed.
- Successful students are a great indication of good teaching choices.
- You get paid to teach and teaching means students need to actually learn what is taught.
- Parents often need help to fully understand student data and home/school support.

Your thoughtful welcome will be appreciated by all.

## 15

**Promote Family Partnerships**

**We are in service to the community and if you want their help you need to know them, respect them and offer them multiple opportunities to be involved.**

What do you picture when you hear the word family? I bet it isn't a mom and dad and 2.5 children anymore. I'm a single working mother; my own reality tells me our students have a variety of family situations. I live one and I see many in my work as a principal. This is certainly a consideration in promoting family partnerships as families are very diverse and have a variety of support needs. Each also has differing availability for volunteering or participating in school activities. It's imperative that you know what the family situation is for each of your students and their families in order to work with all of them in partnership.

As both a parent and a professional I've been on both sides of the home/school connection. As a parent, I've searched for meaningful ways to work with the school when I already work full-time. Professionally, I've searched for the answers to how to provide opportunities for partnership at whatever level families can participate. "Parents aren't interested in working with the school," is a lament I hear in both my capacities.

To promote family partnerships try turning the statement into a series of inquiries such as:

- Why don't parents seem interested in working with the school?
- What do I need to understand about students' diverse family situations?
- How have I effectively reached out to create and maintain positive relationships?

- What social, emotional or cultural influences may exist to affect interactions?
- What opportunities for meaningful ways to participate are available?

As schools are learning communities the involvement of parents is often connected to the demographics of the neighborhood where the school is located. It can be very complex. I've worked in a variety of types of schools from inner city schools to very privileged ones. The one thing they all have in common is that the schools needed to work hard to create both the desire and means for families to participate to the best of their abilities. It doesn't just happen because you ask; you need to ask how it can happen.

A single working mother such as myself can't volunteer 2 hours in the middle of the day but I can write a grant for playground equipment at home in the evening. The grandmother who is raising her eight grandchildren might not be able to supervise centers but she may be able to collect box tops. The stay at home dad you see dropping off his children may seem to be perfect to chaperone a field trip but did you know he works from home and there's no mom in the picture? Oh, if only you knew he was a great webmaster. He might be able to help get that class website going for you.

We are in service to the community and if you want their help you need to know them, respect them and offer them multiple opportunities to be involved. Most people want to help and they don't always know how. Some even offer assistance and are turned down by "head" volunteers who give many hours and like running things. You are the one that needs to proactively reach out and make positive connections.

Real inclusion and involvement takes time, energy, awareness and effort.

- Know the family make up of each of your students.
- Provide a list of ways to help with a description of tasks and a sign up.
- Ask them if they have a special talent or interest area for participation.
- Tell them what types of help you particularly need.
- Provide on and off-site opportunities.

As co-partners in the education of students you aren't just promoting parent involvement with you and your class you're offering strategies to support them. Knowing the family dynamics and availability of parents and guardians will help you successfully do both.

## 16

## Embrace Technology

**The love of technology can create exciting learning opportunities for you and your students that truly enhance learning.**

If you haven't hugged your computer recently you are really missing out. The love of technology can create exciting learning opportunities for you and your students that truly enhance learning. Our current students have never known a world without the internet. When I mentioned this to my son Chase, he looked at me as if I must have grown up with the dinosaurs. To Chase, who is 12, technology is a given. "I can't imagine how you lived without it," he told me logging onto his computer to show me a cool website. "How boring would that be?"

The question you can ask instead is "How exciting and interesting can learning be?" I've worked with some wonderful teachers who answered this question by embracing technology with true passion. One 2nd grade colleague, Joan Smith, decided in her sixties to learn to integrate technology into her classroom. Joan made movies with her students, created books with the kids using digital imaging and traveled through time on a regular basis. Every day became an adventure in learning. Students used to get to school early just to start their day with her sooner.

Another awesome teacher, Mary Fran Lynch, opened up the possibilities in her 3rd grade class by piloting interactive white boards. Mary Fran submerged herself in creating engaging lessons that allowed students to see the places they were studying, manipulate objects, words and numbers when problem solving, access videos or create and watch short movies about their learning

process. Mary Fran's contagious love of technology even led her to apply and be accepted to become a Google Educator. Now teachers as well as Mary Fran's students benefit from her expertise.

One of the most effective and creative teachers ever, Janet Zutler, took integrating technology to a whole different level. Janet differentiated learning and specifically addressed different individual students' needs in her Special Day Class. She carefully previewed and installed a variety of programs to create technology centers that would motivate students and allow them to work independently during center time. She also researched surround sound systems and after finding solid evidence of the benefits of using them in the classroom campaigned to get a system installed. Janet's advocacy led to improved student engagement and implementation of similar systems in other SDC rooms.

You don't need to be an expert to become involved in using technology. It's a tool for enhancing the human components of teaching and learning and can be used in a variety of ways and levels such as:

- Using a digital camera or video camera to document the year.
- Recording lessons for review and reflection.
- Documenting student presentations. Providing on-line professional development and resources.
- Offering students differentiated instruction and intervention
- Allowing students to create projects and presentations.

If you don't have a lot of experience using technology for teaching you can start off by becoming comfortable using e-mail to communicate with parents and colleagues. Next, try out the software that now comes with most course materials. Although it takes time to check out learning to use these resources they will end up saving you time once you've gone through them.

Work with a colleague or grade level partners to share the learning. You can also do on-line tutorials that take you through how to use different programs. Log on and explore the internet, you will be amazed at how many teacher support sites exist.

If you're already using technology keep exploring how to use it better. It changes faster than we do and the resources it can provide to support teaching and learning are great. Technology-based intervention programs can target instruction, provide practice for mastery of State standards and keep accurate records of student progress. Educational websites and on-line learning can save you time through accessing proven grade level and subject specific lesson plans for your use. Go for it!

## 17

**Invite and Embrace Evaluation**

**It's hard to put yourself in the position to self-evaluate or be evaluated. The real breakthroughs occur when you're willing to do so.**

Some teachers believe that their evaluations once or twice a year are the only important measure of who they are and how they are perceived as teachers. This isn't true. Formal evaluations are a part of an important personnel process and do provide some accountability but the vital measure of a teacher is in their continual growth and in the accomplishments of their students.

It isn't enough to be trained and to teach something, teachers have to believe they are personally responsible for reaching every student and students have to actually learn the lessons taught. You must strive to be a life-long learner and ever evolving professional who constantly improves. Embrace evaluation as a tool that can help you learn and grow.

Several ways to get a good baseline for self evaluation include:

- Using your district evaluation tool to self assess your practices
- Downloading the State Standards for the Teaching Profession and/or National Standards
- Self scoring the rubrics for professional standards
- Audio recording a lesson or lessons
- Video recording a lesson or lessons
- Collaborating with a colleague to observe and give feedback
- Asking your administrator for feedback and support



It's hard to put yourself in the position to self evaluate or be evaluated. The real breakthroughs occur when you're willing to do so. When I worked as a Reading Recovery Teacher, a form of evaluation each of us went through was to teach "behind the glass" a couple of times a year. We each taught a lesson in a specially equipped room that had a two-way mirror. The teacher and student were observed by all the other reading specialists and our trainer. The lessons were recorded as well and used for ongoing training. Of course everyone wanted to look like a super star and usually brought their best student for the session. When it was my turn I brought Natalie, a first grader who had already progressed several levels. I was certain she'd do great and I'd look good. Wrong! Nothing went right. Natalie had hit a plateau and nothing I did seemed to help move her forward in our session. I initially thought I'd failed miserably until I listened to the feedback from the group observing and reflected on the choices I'd made.

Several people expressed how much it helped them to see a lesson where the strategies we were learning were not working. It made them ask why and question their own practices. That led to the group brainstorming the other strategies they might have tried and gave me great insight into how I might proceed with Natalie. I realized I had not really embraced the session for the great tool it could be. I'd made the mistake of viewing it as a test I had to pass rather than a way to really look at where Natalie was, where I wanted her to be and how I would get her there. The feedback the group gave me helped me exit Natalie from the program 3 weeks later. Every behind-the-glass session after that, I brought my most challenging student so I could benefit from my colleagues evaluation of the lesson and feedback on my practice.

The important lesson I learned was not to be afraid to put my practice out in order to improve it. If you put on a show for evaluation you learn nothing and the process becomes a formality. Make it mean something by actually learning from it and ensuring that the process will help you serve students better.

Ask to be evaluated. Use every source you can to get feedback. Check in with students to see if they understand lessons. Check their work to see if how you are teaching results in lesson mastery and understanding. Students never fail, we do. Evaluate yourself on an ongoing basis to stay on track.

## 18

## Plan Procedures

**You need to tell students before they ask what is expected and how it's to be done.**

In all the preparation that's done before students arrive to begin learning, planning procedures is one of the most necessary. Your classroom is ready; you've set an expectation for students, studied the curriculum and created an agenda and lesson plans. No problem right?

I remember that rush of feeling like it was all under control. It lasted the whole 30 seconds it took my class of thirty to pile into the room and simultaneously begin asking questions. Kids always have questions and often they have to do with how something is supposed to be done. Thank goodness I had planned procedures. Why weren't they following them?

When you plan your procedures remember that you will need a way to communicate them quickly and clearly. Think instant understanding. You need to tell students before they ask what is expected and how it's to be done. It's a good idea to show them, model the procedure and practice it. It's also helpful to have visuals such as posted procedures like:

- Enter quietly
- Check the agenda
- Begin warm-ups

Another helpful visual is to post digital pictures of the students actually doing each procedure. The kids love seeing themselves up on the wall and it personalizes the reminder of how to line up, where

to eat their snack, the appropriate way to work and play together. This is especially helpful for very young students and students with special needs. Plan procedures for:

- Lining up
- Walking to class or lunch, etc.
- Beginning and ending work
- Turning things in
- Movement in the classroom for transitions, centers and activities

Procedures need to be simple and as easily remembered as 1, 2, and 3 such as:

1. Line up quietly
2. Face forward
3. Keep hands, feet and objects to yourself

I get a kick out of walking through the school on the first day of school and seeing teachers practicing procedures with their students. It's especially fun with the younger students who are always very self-conscious about standing ramrod straight in their lines. As a teacher I was always glad once I had gone through all the procedures with my class, practiced them and had enough time pass to see they had become automatic. That's what you are aiming for, procedures so simple and sensible that students easily integrate them into the classroom.

With procedures like transitions from one activity to another it is also helpful to have an auditory signal. My creative solution was to hit the button on my dancing gopher that took about 45 seconds to sing a little song. The kids knew that when the gopher sang you moved to the designated area or activity and that you needed to be ready when the song stopped. This may not work for you, but try using a quick audible 5,4,3,2,1 or a ticking timer or recognizable instrumental piece.

Plan a quick non intrusive procedure for restroom use during class like a hand signal, sign out or visible object placed on the student's desk. Preset a time limit so students know what's expected. With young students and special needs students, a buddy system is a good idea.

Make sure to build in good end-of-the-day procedures for:

- Cleaning up
- Organizing homework assignments and materials
- Retrieving personal items and exiting the classroom

This last set of procedures will allow you more time and end your day in a positive and organized way.

## 19

**Beware of Time Bandits**

**Every minute you are with kids, meeting with the school team or collaborating with colleagues is an opportunity to use time to your advantage.**

There's not enough time to \_\_\_\_\_, you fill in the blank. Whatever it is there never seems to be enough time to do it. There's a lot of work that goes into teaching and learning. Squeezing in everything makes you run around like the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland. You constantly look at your watch and yelp "I'm late..." and chances are the important date you are worried about is standardized testing.

Stop it! You are in complete control of the more or less 180 days of school. Pace yourself. Examine, reflect on and redo pacing guides to hit essential standards. Save time by doing this with your grade level partner or team. If you are the only one in your grade level in a small school partner up with teachers at another school in the district or via computer. Above all beware of time bandits.

Time bandits are the practices or lack of strategies that allow for lost time. Lost time is squandered, wasted or stolen time that cannot be recovered. Sometimes it's the lull between entering the room and beginning the lesson, the long and needless transition from one thing to another or an accepted but research disputed practice like silent sustained reading. Other times it's the surprise assembly or important but impromptu parent volunteer presentation, the forgotten materials preparation or some non-vital announcement over the loud speaker. It could even be arriving a little late and finishing a little early.

So what's 5 minutes here or there? If you really want to know keep a time log by quickly noting what's occurring in your classroom throughout the day. Do this for a day or even better a week to see just how much time is being lost. What and who are your time bandits in class, on the yard, in team meetings and during grade level collaboration? Are they practices you control or not?

If your time bandits are things you do the fix is all yours. What things can you change to use time better? Look at your time log to see if there is a pattern. How can you plan better to use all available time? Are there ways to add time?

I saw a really good example of this when I was visiting a multi-age classroom in Alaska as a consultant. The teacher was sharing how he incorporated reading and following directions with entering and exiting his class or transitioning to other classes. He would write out his directions on a small white board and flash the directions to his students. The older ones loved the game and read the directions to the younger ones who got continual practice in seeing, saying and doing the exactly what they were supposed to do. It was quick, fun, instructional and added value.

Every minute you are with kids, meeting with the school team or collaborating with colleagues is an opportunity to use time to your advantage. Make sure to:

- Start and end on time
- Control time but don't let it control you
- Plan well and stick to the plan
- In meetings make sure to have and follow an agenda
- Set specific "office hours" to discourage impromptu pop in meetings

If your time log shows a pattern of interruptions that are not under your control such as announcements, visitors or too frequent assemblies address them with the school leadership team and your administrator. Your log can be a good tool for documenting the need for a change that will help everyone.

Remember to have a good time while working with students. By eliminating time bandits, following a clear pacing guide, addressing essential standards and being aware of utilizing instructional time to its fullest you will do an excellent job.

## 20

**Research Available Resources**

**When you really research your available material, fiscal and human resources you may find you have more than you imagined.**

You are so lucky. Think about it. You get to go to school each day and help create the future through the work you do with each of your students. You're an architect of destiny with multiple opportunities to build today's thinkers and create tomorrow's leaders. This awesome responsibility is a daunting but exciting task. Begin by researching available resources to create a strong teaching and learning foundation for you and your students. All you need to be successful is a will and a way. You are in control of both these things.

There are always some fiscal, material and human resources that you can utilize to improve how you serve children. Do you know all of yours and have a careful plan to use them? Most schools will have a budget for teachers and/or a community donation process. Look into how much you will receive; what it can be used on and how you can best leverage the funds. To do this you need to know what materials are available for your use and what kind of collaborative support you can expect from colleagues, specialists and volunteers.

In every site I've ever worked in there has been an excess of materials either sitting around available to anyone who wished to use them or stuck on a shelf waiting to be discovered. Maybe I've just been lucky or maybe it's just that no one ever throws anything away. Sometimes this is a good thing and other times it's not. The first order of business is to clear clutter in your classroom and inventory what actual useful materials are available. If you've been

around a long time you may still have materials from the past that need to be thrown away. If you're new don't let yourself inherit a bunch of old stuff from the last teacher that won't be useful to the work you intend to do with students. Above all make sure you have all the adopted materials for students and the appropriate teacher editions for yourself.

After you have inventoried the available material resources in your class collaborate with your grade level to see what other materials are needed or available. Think about how you can use your available budget to add to your materials. Collaborate with your grade level to get the most for your collective money.

Make sure you know how budgets are determined at your site and how you can make proposals for funding projects or special equipment. Also look into grants that can support the work you are doing or want to do.

In addition to available materials and funding, utilize the human resources that colleagues, especially specialists offer. Your colleagues come with a wealth of experiences to share and utilizing their expertise will add enormous value to your classroom.

The specialists at a site will vary depending on the programs in your school. Usually you have access to a Resource or Learning Center Teacher, Speech Therapist and Psychologist and in some cases you may be able to collaborate with a Special Day Class Teacher. Specialists are an important human resource. These colleagues can provide information and services to enrich and support your work with students.

As a Reading Specialist I worked with all teachers K-6 and provided supplementary materials as well as small group and individual student and teacher support. This included conferencing with parents and offering parent education to support strong home/school connections. The Speech and Language Therapist, Resource Teacher, Special Day Class Teacher and aides did push in programs. They provided services in different classes to support full inclusion, extended offerings for students and support for teachers and parents.

When you really research your available material, fiscal and human resources you may find you have more than you imagined. Use resources well.

## 21

**ZAP the Gap**

**By all means talk about the Achievement Gap but then address it.**

A great many educators talk about closing the achievement gap. It's important to talk about but remember talk is cheap and ineffective if it's all you do. The achievement gap between student sub-groups won't go away just because you talk about it, think about it and worry about how to eliminate it. You have to "ZAP the gap" by collaborating with colleagues and taking action:

**Zero in on data, issues and strategies**

**Analyze information to determine actions and build in accountability**

**Proactively put systems into place and monitor implementation and progress**

When you profile your class at the beginning of the year to discover the range of your students and their specific needs you do this for your individual work with your group of students. The same thing needs to be done with your grade level and the school as a whole. Your class is like a State in the United States. You're always part of a single group and still a part of the National picture.

You control your class so start by thinking about how it reflects the larger picture by examining your class profile. Once you zero in on your class, look at your grade level and the school as a whole. Do this in collaboration with colleagues to identify the whole school picture and how it can best be addressed in component grade level and class parts.



- Did you make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in all subgroups?
- Which subgroups did not make AYP?
- Which subgroups made gains?
- To what do you attribute gains and losses?
- Is there a clear identifiable subgroup or are there different subgroups to address?

Your answers to the above questions can guide you and your colleagues to identify which student subgroups need acceleration. From there you identify focal students within your class, grade level and across the school to proactively focus on using specific interventions and strategies.

When you pick focal students it doesn't mean you ignore everyone else. Your focal students represent the range and subgroups that need acceleration to close the achievement gap. Understand that all students need to make gains but those comprising the lowest achieving need to make more gains to positively close the achievement gap.

To really ZAP the gap you have to have a plan to identify and address the needs of focal students. You and your colleagues will need to have ongoing dialogue about your focal students and formative as well as summative assessments to monitor their progress. I suggest making your work visible by posting focal student progress in a team setting where it is prominent to everyone. Student confidentiality can be kept by not displaying names and using an agreed upon coding system.

By all means talk about the Achievement Gap but then address it. It takes quite a commitment but it's what our kids need for us to do. It will mean taking a good hard look at all the data on your own and with others and collaborating to mutually identify needs and the strategies to address them.

When you do this alone and with your team the gains can be tremendous. You get what you focus on. There is a need to focus on accelerating our lowest performing students in order to ZAP the gap.

## 22

**Build Your Class Community**

**In order to get everyone to care about each other and common core values provide opportunities for students to know and understand each other as well as agree on core values.**

The initial work you do preparing for students before they enter your classroom will facilitate the process of building a classroom learning community. Start this process immediately as students will enter as individuals and must learn to become a cohesive learning community.

You may believe you know your students based on data you've studied to profile your classroom. Who they actually are and how they will interact with others still needs to be determined. You get to decide how group work happens through how you choose to set up your classroom community.

Think about what it means to be a successful learning community:

**Respect is evident**

**Everyone cares about each other and common core values**

**All are accountable**

**People work together**

To R. E. A. P. the rewards of creating a class community talk to students about setting up a respectful learning community. Explain that mutual respect is everyone's responsibility. It is a non-negotiable and must be defined clearly together. Brainstorm ways to be respectful with students and model manners and interactions for them and with them. Decide with students how to connect showing respect with classroom rules and procedures as well as group

work. Come to an agreement on a statement of respect that works for your class. One respect statement my class came up with that I particularly liked was:

“We will respect ourselves and each other in everything we do.”

This covered everything and set in place a great foundation for building a solid learning community. Students knew and understood what the statement meant.

When you have decided on your statement together have students make a sign to post. With younger students use the activity to do guided group writing. With older kids have them write it in their journals or planners with an explanation in their own words that explains exactly what the statement means. Make sure to have every student put their signature on the respect statement you make to post in the classroom. Explain that by signing their name they are agreeing to the statement now and in the future.

In order to get everyone to care about each other and common core values provide opportunities for students to know and understand each other as well as agree on core values. Use age appropriate introduction activities at the beginning of the year such as sharing with younger students and partner introductions with older students to allow for non-threatening interactions.

Follow a process of identifying important individual and group core values by discussing that core values are central beliefs that can guide every person's best actions. I find it useful to do this in a circle time no matter what grade you teach as the circle allows each person to participate or pass quickly and equitably. You may want to share a few examples of core values such as, kindness, honesty, and perseverance.

Chart student examples of core values, discuss them and come to agreement on the values your class community wants to focus on. For younger students, guide the discussion more as needed by asking questions such as:

- How do friends act? (Kind, nice, fair)
- What do friends do? (Share, tell the truth, play nice, get along)
- What should we do for our friends? (Try our best, be honest)

When you have identified the core values for your classroom community have students or student groups illustrate the values. Post them by your respect statement and review them regularly with students. A good way to do this is to set a regular class meeting or circle group time to discuss accountability and how well everyone is working together.

## 23

## Provide a Clear Map

**It's never too early to start building in organizational practices that will support student learning.**

I love Map Quest even though it's not always accurate. What I find so appealing is that when I use it I feel like I have some control over the direction I'm going in. It makes me feel less lost in unknown territories. Providing a clear map for students can have the same effect. It offers them a guide for learning that can focus their daily direction as well as their learning journey over time.

In college we get a syllabus that shows where the course begins, how it will progress and the final destination. Elementary school shouldn't be any different especially as our goal is to get our students into college someday. It's never too early to start building in organizational practices that will support student learning.

When you create curriculum maps and pacing guides with your colleagues you provide a clear and comprehensive guide for the work you do with students. Often this is shared with parents at the beginning of the school year and on Back to School Night. Remember to also do this with students. Introduce the standards and work you will do together as appropriate to the age of your students. As part of your initial work explain how this will look daily and weekly by sharing a system for posting a daily agenda.

The daily agenda can be a really great tool for everyone in the class. Post what instruction and activities will occur with a time for each to begin. This helps keep you on track and gives students an

overview for the day. It saves time when students know what they will be doing and when they will be doing it. The agenda can even be a teaching tool with subjects listed with a photo or graphic and a small clock instead of the written time.

It can also be a good idea to identify the standards you will be addressing in lessons. If you post grade level standards in your room you can identify them in your lesson by number. This can remind you to communicate it by stating the standard as a goal of your lesson. If anyone walks into your room and asks a student what they are learning, the student should be able to tell them. What they are learning and why should never be a mystery to any student. Kid friendly versions of the standards are even available on the internet.

Students should also always have a clear guide for how to succeed at mastering standards. What does success look like? The use of rubrics can provide such a guide. Rubrics can be teacher created or collaboratively agreed upon. The best are succinct and give a breakdown of the necessary elements to show understanding and mastery.

Even very young children can benefit from clear, posted rubrics. Kindergarten Team teachers Christine Barbara and Debbie Arrieta post a visual example for students that shows what a properly written and illustrated journal entry looks like. When students finish their journal entries they are encouraged to go up and compare their work with the rubric and are then asked to reflect on if they have completed all parts of their assignment. It's powerful to see 5 year olds assessing their work and adjusting it to improve their finished products.

With older kids, a checklist is also a good way to provide a guideline. Students receive the checklist before they begin their work, go through it as they are working and recheck it at completion. It fosters independence, accountability and success.

Completed lesson plans, agendas and rubrics are all good ways to provide a clear map for students. Combining these with curriculum maps and pacing guides to direct your work and share it with colleagues and parents will ensure that everyone knows what's going on daily, weekly and monthly throughout the year.

## 24

**Create Scaffolds to Success**

**As students are often at different levels of understanding and mastery you must create multiple scaffolds to address their social, emotional or academic starting point and to address their ongoing successful learning.**

A scaffold is a support offered at the level of need. In construction they are used where work is currently occurring. The scaffolds move as the needs change. It's the same in education. As students are often at different levels of understanding and mastery you must create multiple scaffolds to address their social, emotional or academic starting point and to support their ongoing successful learning.

A variety of things can serve as scaffolds to create working and learning platforms. These include:

- Strategic seating
- Student-centered classroom environment
- Working teams or table groups
- Specific instructional groupings
- Push-in interventions
- Pull out programs
- Rotation within or across grade levels
- Multiple modes and methods of teaching
- Project-based learning
- Technology programs
- Extended services before and/or after school
- Home/school interventions and supports
- Enrichment opportunities

When you profile your class to see who your students are and what their data can tell you about them your profile provides a blueprint for where and how to scaffold. This will help you determine:

- Who sits where,
- How partnerships and groups will be determined.

- Which programs are appropriate for which students.
- How you can best structure your class teaching to reach the range of learners.

As a classroom teacher you have many opportunities to scaffold learning through your teaching choices. We all have preferred methods of working as well as learning. It's important to remember that students do also. In addition to specific needs such as English Language Development instruction, mainstreaming and differentiating instruction for all levels, students have different learning styles.

Outstanding examples of scaffolding for student success can often be observed in kindergarten classes. Everything you ever need to know about scaffolding you can learn in a well-run Kindergarten. I think this is because it is one of the hardest grade levels to teach. Even if students have gone to preschool, Kindergarten is their first "real" formal school experience. In addition to a huge range of abilities and little formal data, special needs may not be initially apparent or identified. Kinder students, who are English Language Learners, as beginning students, often have less experience with formal English language acquisition. With all these factors in place as well as the fact that Kindergarten is much more academic than in the past scaffolding well is a necessity.

Annie Quan, a veteran Kindergarten teacher with a Special Education background, knows how to create multiple scaffolds for student learning. In a single 30 minute lesson I have seen her use concrete examples anchored with academic language instruction, visuals, realia, interactive oral and written strategies, kinesthetics and music.

Annie utilizes multiple modes of teaching within a structured classroom setting that defines floor space, table space and centers. Students receive clearly communicated instruction that allows them to see, hear, touch, feel and anchor their learning experiences. Annie follows this by checking for understanding. She re-teaches as necessary individually and/or in groups and provides independent practice and extensions.

Annie's grade level partner Rosa Leon also creates great scaffolds for student success. Rosa, who is bilingual, uses her expertise with Spanish to support better communication with her Spanish speaking students. She uses many of the same types of strategies as Annie and also integrates the use of technology to support differentiated and independent learning for students.

Although Annie and Rosa both use some similar strategies their scaffolds differ because their students and the make-up of their classes are very different. To be as successful at creating your own scaffolds combine your strengths with strategies for your students' specific needs.

## 25

## Uncover the Standards

**Identify the essential standards for your grade level and hit them hard. Uncover them by putting them in kid friendly terms.**

"I covered all the standards last year. I covered them over and over but it's like I was talking to the walls. You can't tell I taught anything when you look at the test scores."

You may have heard this lament in your own school or you may have even expressed it yourself. With the pressure to provide a State Approved and Standards based program for all children and continuously raise test scores concern about covering all the standards is constantly with teachers.

As a supervisor of teachers I've become more concerned with uncovering the standards. In 7 years as a principal observing in classrooms, listening to teachers and talking to students I've seen the frustration over covering standards cause a disconnect between teaching and learning. Sometimes covering standards has become a process of going over everything that may be important rather than a conscious and strategic teaching of essential skills that will support reaching mastery in key standards. This is a classic case where less is more can translate into higher success for student learning. What good is covering all the standards if students aren't learning them? Here's a great place to stop to reflect:

- What are the essential standards for my grade level?
- How can I strategically plan to address the standards?
- What measures can I use to ensure student mastery?



- How can I build in ways to address moving forward and also providing support and re-teaching where it's needed?
- What resources and/or systems and structures can be utilized to better advantage?

Standards aren't going to go away and they shouldn't. Standards provide an important measure for accountability and give us a common measure that can guide reviewing and improving instruction. There is no such thing as teaching without learning. Without learning, instruction is simply an onslaught of information. Forget about what you need to cover and focus on what students need to learn.

Identify the essential standards for your grade level and hit them hard. Uncover them by putting them in kid-friendly terms. Post the standards you will be working on for the year and refer to them often. When doing a lesson always let students know what standards you are addressing, why they are important and how they will be measured. Even better collaborate on this with your grade level team to have a cohesive focus across the grade level. Communicate it to parents as well as students as a grade level expectation for learning. If each grade level does this you will have clear and comprehensive articulation across all grade levels and comprehensive home/school support.

I saw this in action when I toured schools as a district task force member. Our role was to visit schools and observe collaborative systems. One elementary school we visited was in danger of becoming a program improvement school. The teachers in each class and each grade level identified the essential standards for their grade level, posted and taught them all year. Small colored stickers were used to mark which standards were taught. Different colors identified when the standards were addressed and how many times they were taught. At a glance, the teacher, every student and even an outside visitor like me could see the accountability to the standards. When the test scores for that school were posted the following year they had gone up over 40 points. Instead of talking to the walls, these teachers let the walls talk to them. They uncovered the standards, taught them strategically and student achievement increased.

**Be accountable  
by accepting total  
responsibility.  
Adopt a no  
excuses attitude  
to find out how to  
reach each  
student.**

“No one cares and I don’t either!” It’s been almost 20 years since I heard this from Juan, a student in my first year teaching assignment. I was stunned. How could he think I didn’t care? All I did was care. Why wasn’t it enough? Juan was a student who faced many challenges. I knew I cared about him but at the time I didn’t realize I hadn’t conveyed how I felt clearly and consistently through my actions.

Other children recognized that I was there for them just not Juan. I thought Juan was being unreasonable. I didn’t have enough experience to know that the responsibility for his failure to understand lay with me. I needed to find out how to be there for him and every other child based on what each of them needed. It’s something I remind myself and others about because every so often I hear the echo of Juan in my own child when he’s telling me about school or in other children who come to visit me in my office. It’s the same complaint with different children and varying causes. Each time, the child thinks “no one,” especially their teacher cares. It made me realize we all have to continually find out how to care and how to create caring children.

There isn’t a one-size-fits-all answer but there are some common strategies I’ve used and seen others use that do help. I call it the C. A. R. E. package. C. A. R. E. offers strategies to provide a safe and nurturing environment for learning that shows students they are valued. The four proactive ways to do this are to convey and teach:

- Commitment
- Accountability
- Rigor and reflection
- Equity

Your commitment is initially evident in the choice you made to be in the classroom. To build on that remember that your actions are always an example. The phrase “No one cares,” is both a cry for help and an invitation to show and tell how you do indeed care. “I don’t care either,” is a child’s insecurity talking. Address both these things through constant awareness and thoughtful actions.

Be accountable by accepting total responsibility. Adopt a no excuses attitude in order to find out how to reach each student. This takes rigorous effort and application of multiple modes of careful and caring teaching. You have to reflect on what is and isn’t working for children individually and as a whole and make adjustments accordingly. Equitable attention and education is not a set of equal actions. Equity involves using strategies that address the needs of each student to allow them to be successful socially, emotionally and academically.

A great 6th grade teacher I worked with, Gail, a veteran of 30 years, never stopped learning. Gail, in partnership with the Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, California, became an action researcher for the Caring School Community Program. It helped her become a master at creating respectful, interactive relationships in her classroom. She did this by getting to know each child, communicating proactively with their parents and setting clear expectations and guidelines.

Throughout the year Gail regularly worked with students to problem-solve issues and concerns. Gail set weekly meetings with the class and set mutual agreements for their work together. She conveyed her clear commitment to students and the community through daily modeling that showed them she cared deeply about them.

Gail also held everyone accountable including me. Her commitment to teaching and learning as well as serving students equitably had a compelling clarity. Her example taught us all to continually question and reflect on how to serve students and promote their positive characteristics. Gail as a teacher learner and practitioner embodied C. A. R. E. She challenged herself daily to become a better teacher by focusing on the social emotional security of her students as well as ethics, academic access and continual progress. Juan would have loved Gail.

## 27

## Be a Mentor

**Every child represents an opportunity for mentorship.**

Why be a mentor?

Lisle was always alone dragging her booted foot behind her. Her brace didn't stop her but it did slow her down. Everyone else seemed to run on by leaving Lisle alone in the dust. Johnny wasn't alone but was always pale and slightly ill, sitting on the bench watching but not playing. On the other end of the spectrum was Liam with his Mohawk and natty suit. It was quite a fashion statement for a 5 year old.

Every child presents an opportunity for mentorship. Some like Lisle really need help with social connections. Children like Johnny need reassurance and individuals like Liam sometimes require support for being brave enough to skip to their own beat. There's no perfect program for this kind of strategic mentorship. You simply need to pay attention to students' needs and address them. The good news is it's not expensive and there's no difficult or time consuming system for accountability. You have to be aware of the need for mentorship and provide it. If you do it right no one, especially the child, knows that you have made a focused commitment. It simply seems natural.

My suggestion is that you be a strategically assigned mentor or a SAM by observing who may need extra support and then arranging to give it to them daily. You do this through informal and ongoing checks, conversations, interactions etc. You do it quietly and consistently to let kids know that someone is watching, knows what is going on and cares about them.

I'm not talking about the care you give all students or the thoughtfulness that you would normally apply. These are all part of the daily challenge and joy of being a teacher. I know you do this. To be a strategically assigned mentor is the extra step of seeing patterns of need and responding to these needs in an ongoing and thoughtful way.

Do you remember a time in your life when you felt alone? Maybe you were a latch key kid or the odd one out. Your parents may have divorced and as a result you were always traveling between homes. Maybe something made you feel different, separate and vulnerable. You might have been very sensitive or shy. You may have even been a bully or class clown. It can be kind of scary to be a kid and even more frightening to be a child who feels alone or who actually is alone.

Sally was a child separated by trauma. Homeless and an incest survivor with a mother in rehab, it was obvious she needed mentoring. Her teacher, Mariza was one of the most patient teachers I've ever met. Mariza was consistent, caring, firm but kind. She paid attention not just to the spoken but also the unspoken issues that Sally expressed. Sally despite her home life thrived in Mariza's class.

Teachers who choose to be mentors make the important decision to actively seek out the children who need them beyond the classroom and playground. They listen with their hearts and are generous with their time and actions. It is not simply paying attention; it's looking below the surface and searching for ways to nurture unspoken needs.

Look in any active classroom or on any crowded playground and you will see social dynamics in action where someone like Lisle, Johnny or Liam needs to be included, supported and mentored in an ongoing fashion. You may even know a child like Sally whose difficult past threatens her daily reality and future prospects. These are the children who constantly need more than the services school provides.

It costs nothing and requires no special program or materials to see a child's need and be responsible for addressing it daily. Mentoring is an ongoing action that strategically seeks to close the social and emotional gap between individual students and their peers. Be a mentor.

## 28

## Face Race

**In order to face race as an issue in teaching and learning you must first confront racism within yourself and acknowledge the importance of antiracist teaching practices.**

Race is an issue in life and in education. You need to face it and in doing so face yourself and your own attitudes about race and racism. You may be tempted to say, "Race does not matter," or "Children are children, I don't look at color." Well, open your eyes. We live in a multiracial society and denying it does not make it go away or magically erase racism.

I can almost hear you say, "Wait a second. I'm not a racist. I treat everyone the same, as a member of the human race." Great, but everyone is not the same. It's what makes our world so wonderful and sometimes makes our jobs really difficult. As human beings of different races, genders, belief systems we all have different realities. Our shared humanity should be without question but that is not always the case. We have to acknowledge that as a learning community made up of our larger neighborhood community we serve students and parents of different races. We ourselves also have a racial identity and it is an active part of who we are and how we live and work. Ask yourself:

- Do I know and understand the implications of my school's demographics?
- How might the demographics in my classroom affect individuals or groups of students or their parents?
- What is my racial identity and how do my background and experiences influence my work as well as my understanding of students' diverse needs.

- What personal growth needs to occur for me to have a deeper understanding of issues involving race?
- In what ways are my lessons inclusive allowing everyone to feel connection or perhaps inadvertently exclusionary?
- How well do I serve students and parents of different races?
- In what ways does my own racial identity factor into teaching and learning in my classroom?
- What professional growth can I participate in to advance my understanding of race?
- How can I confront racism in myself and others?

These are not easy questions and as such they don't have easy answers. I ask you to question yourself for a very good reason. In order to face race as an issue in teaching and learning, you must first confront racism within yourself and acknowledge the importance of antiracist teaching practices.

This can be especially hard for anyone who has not experienced the effects of racism personally or who can't admit that the problem even exists.

Each of the questions posed above grew out of specific incidents. A parent, student or teacher of another race experienced an awareness, incidence or continuing pattern where race played a central role. Each brought up a concern that they identified through the lens of their personal experience and their reality within the class and school setting. In many cases I was not the first person they spoke to about their concerns.

These concerns surfaced in many schools not just one. Often individuals felt no one listened or understood. Each time these concerns surfaced it identified the need to keep confronting why it is important to reflect on, dialogue about and deal with race and racism as an educational issue.

Look at the demographics in your classroom and school. Previously you've been asked to look at who your students are, personally and academically, now I'm specifically asking you to think about and examine race. No matter how diverse a class or school is the common factor in all is that there's usually just one teacher in the classroom. You design the environment, determine seating and create lessons. Do you do this with an awareness of who your students are from a racial perspective? Where students sit, how they are grouped, whether or not they are isolated socially, emotionally and/or academically is important. Face the fact that race plays a major factor in education. Choose to be an aware, anti-racist educator.

## 29

**Recognize Every Student Is Gifted and Talented**

**All children whether low or high performing, possess some quality or talent that sets them apart and can be utilized in positive ways.**

Every child is gifted and talented. They may not be considered or designated as G.A.T.E. students but they are all gifted and talented in some way. If you believe this you will search for what makes each child special. If you search, you will find more than you imagined. It doesn't matter if the student doesn't speak English, has a learning disability, is faced with physical, social or emotional challenges or developmental delays. It doesn't matter if the student is below grade level. All children whether low or high performing possess some quality or talent that sets them apart and can be utilized in positive ways.

As an intervention teacher I often served students that others designated as hopeless. It's a good thing I don't believe in hopeless. One year there was Derrick who sat silent and still in all his classes and never turned in any work. People thought he was incapable of comprehension at least until I found that Derrick was a gifted artist. He could draw the characters we read about in history or language arts. Derrick could put them into sequential order, retell a story or recount the timeline of a historical event. His silence didn't mean he wasn't listening and learning. His ability to draw detailed and intricate notes showed that even if he never became a scholar Derrick might someday become an artist.

Another student Tony tested at Below Basic. Many people wrote him off academically. Tony was medically fragile and was in intervention because of low



test scores. He actually was incredibly intelligent. Tony's gift was a quick wit and screwy sense of humor. He thought it was funny to use standardized tests to create bubble pictures. When this was discovered and Tony was given attention for succeeding his test scores improved. Sure his sense of humor caused some problems but it was still a gift. It made Tony likeable and accessible to students and ultimately a joy to work with.

As a principal I'm constantly surprised by how gifted and talented students are. Watching them can teach us so much. Sara, a special education student with developmental delays struggled with learning. First grade was really hard for Sara but no matter how many challenges she faced Sara persisted. Persistence is a gift. Individuals who persist can transfer the quality of tenacity from one thing to another. Persistence always offers the hope of improvement.

Some gifts or talents are more apparent than others. Sometimes the talent isn't an ability to do something and is instead an ability to perceive or understand something others do not. Fifth grade student Lisa had the gift of empathy. If you looked at her grades, the activities she was in or the kids she hung out with you might make the mistake of thinking she was an average kid. Lisa however was an extraordinarily emotionally intelligent child who had the ability to see and understand complex issues swirling around her. She always knew what to say to make the people around her feel better if they were having a bad day. Lisa also knew not to say anything and simply hug a friend who needed comfort.

I personally believe that every child we serve is a gift. When we teach others we get to constantly learn. Cultivate your talent for recognizing how special every child you serve is and honor them by discovering the positive gifts and talents they possess.

## 30

**Bust Bullies**

**The social and emotional dynamics that occur among even the youngest students can be really disturbing and must be dealt with thoroughly and with care.**

Bullies come in all shapes and sizes. To bust bullies you need to really be aware of who the bullies are in your school. You know the large kid in the corner who always seems to be mixing it up? Don't be fooled. Sometimes that child is actually the victim of a bully or group of bullies. Bullies are often socially smart and alert. The whispered threat, mean names, accidental push and polite public apology are all tools of the trade for bullies. They know how to use these tools to their advantage. Sometimes the child who's caught hitting someone has endured ongoing harassment.

Go beyond being reactive when there's a blow up in class or on the playground. Dig into what happened and who was involved. Often a lot of attention is paid to playground bullying that results in physical altercations without any investigation into why the incident occurred. The media and many anti-bullying programs focus on these instances of overt aggression and ask what can be done to stop this kind of bullying. It's a good question to start with however you need to look deeper to also identify:

- Root causes of overt aggression
- Patterns of behavior and involvement
- Social, emotional and academic factors
- Alternative forms of aggression that wreck havoc and are more covert

An angry child who lashes out often has good reasons for their actions. Negative actions are still

unacceptable but getting to the root of aggression and providing counseling and appropriate follow up are key. You may notice triggers to negative behavior as well as commonly involved students. It's important to also be aware of the less noticeable alternative forms of aggression such as cliques that form and isolate or freeze kids out of activities, use tag team tactics of ongoing verbal jabs, synchronized laughter or the silent treatment. Parents and even kids themselves may actually express: "It's just kid stuff - nothing serious." They're wrong. All forms of bullying are serious and need to be busted.

The social and emotional dynamics that occur among even the youngest students can be really disturbing and must be dealt with thoroughly and with care. Busting bullies is hard work and is an ongoing necessity. These days there is the added component of cyber bullying. With computers and cell phones readily available at home and at school there is the potential for bullying to occur 24/7. Do you remember what it was like to hear a rumor about someone or even yourself? The word spreads like a disease. Today's elementary students are very tech savvy having never known a world without the internet. Even young students e-mail, post messages and use chat rooms. Many students also have cell phones for safety reasons and sometimes use these resources to text and target other students.

If you've spent time getting to know your kids you will have a good handle on who they are and how they handle themselves. Remember not to make assumptions. If there is a report of bullying listen to the complaint carefully and don't just dismiss it. Ask questions of the children involved. Do this separately and follow up with any witnesses separately. Document what occurred and how it was handled and follow up with calls home as appropriate. If you bust bullies and do it quickly and fairly you will stop a pattern that could continue from class to playground to the neighborhood and even ongoing across grade levels.

Most important be proactive and teach students about what bullying is, why it must be reported and non-violent strategies for addressing bullying. This came home to me recently when my own son reluctantly reported being bullied at school. His reluctance to report was part of the unwritten "never rat" rule most kids embrace. We need to teach that bullying is unacceptable and support our students not to accept it either.

## 31

## Never Fear Failure

**Excellence  
requires letting go  
of the need to  
look good in order  
to become great.**

When I first started skiing I was proud of the fact that I never fell. My pride disappeared when I realized I never fell because I took no risks. I was a champion of the bunny hill. I was too careful, conservative and uptight. I guess I just wanted to look good. It took me a while to realize that looking good wouldn't make me a better skier. It's the same with teaching.

It's important to be prepared, plan well and have a clear design for teaching and learning but it is also important to take risks. I love the quote "With the first failure education begins," because it invites exploration and discovery. I don't agree with the idea that "Failure is not an option." Failure is an option it just shouldn't be anyone's final destination.

It can be scary to totally tank when teaching a lesson but sometimes that's when you actually learn something. I've never learned anything that moved me forward by simply doing a good job. Excellence requires letting go of the need to look good in order to become great. This doesn't mean you should seek to fail at anything it just means you shouldn't be afraid of failure.

Fear, like worry wastes time. Sometimes the only way to get over fear is to actually experience the failure you dread. As a teacher leader training to do model lessons for other teachers, I was once asked to get up and do an impromptu demonstration lesson for some of the best teachers around. I didn't feel prepared. The lesson felt like it was a disaster.

I could feel my face get red and hear a distinct hesitancy in my voice. Surely, everyone would see I had no idea what I was doing. Guess what? I lived and I learned. My colleagues, because they were the best teachers around supported my learning, offered specific and helpful feedback and thanked me for going first.

Sometimes you have to leap before you look otherwise fear can paralyze you as an educational practitioner. You can become stuck in a rut and fall into a repetitive practice that feels safe but offers no growth for you or your students. Tried and true lesson traditions in classrooms are often a fear of failure pretending to be repeated best practices. It's really a clear run down a bunny hill. How about taking on a real mountain instead? Get out of your own way and shake up your professional practices. Try new things and extend yourself.

Start out by letting go of the idea of being perfect. My personal definition of a perfectionist is, "a person who is incapable of happiness or satisfaction." It's not possible for them because they seek the impossible. What kind of teacher can you be if perfection is the standard you aspire to or that you expect of students? People aren't perfect they're human. Give yourself and others a break and accept that to be successful you don't need to fear failure.

Let students know they shouldn't be afraid of failure either. Kids are especially concerned with doing everything "right." Remind them that if they knew everything and could do anything that was asked of them they wouldn't need to be in school. Teach them that learning is about challenging yourself, sometimes hitting the mark or missing it but always gaining from the experience.

## 32

## Be a Change Agent

**You can't control anyone but yourself but you individually can be an agent of change.**

Gandhi said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." What powerful and wise advice. The success of our work is all about change. The one thing that never changes is that everything changes all the time. Learning is about constant change and growth yet so many people resist it. Change can be scary and even uncomfortable. It can also be transformational just like the change a caterpillar goes through.

For some people being a change agent is like being a secret agent. They don't want anyone to know what they're working on because it might be stopped. One of the reasons is that sometimes change is not collaborative, it sweeps in like a tsunami and overwhelms everyone so that any inkling of change signals danger.

Another reason people resist either changing or instigating change is that they fear confronting the status quo. The status quo is like a hydra, a monster with many heads. If you wake it from a comfortable rest any number of its heads may bite your head off. Sometimes people settle for wishing to see the change they believe should be. It's definitely not the noble call Gandhi invited.

Take a good look at where you're at, what you're doing and the changes you'd like to see. Find a way to open up dialogue remembering that dialogue is more than one way. Accept that there will be disagreements. You can't control anyone but yourself but you individually can be an agent of change.

You can act to instigate positive change for yourself and the students in your classroom. Your actions may end up speaking louder than your words and encourage others to change as well. This is a call to action. It all starts with one person and radiates outward.

It may be that a change is proposed to you. Consider it well before either accepting or denying its worth. Being a change agent is also about being able to address changing a proposal, mandate or action you believe will have a negative effect. I'm not suggesting you be insubordinate but rather that you offer specific, reflective input and positive alternate suggestions.

Janet Zutler, a teacher I constantly learn from and admire, is a gifted agent of positive change. She starts with herself asking what it is she can do to better serve students. One year she realized that her students needed direct instruction in character education, core values and pride. Janet researched how to provide those things to her class. She then volunteered to share her work with others throughout the school. Janet presented at staff meetings and helped organize monthly character education assemblies. Eventually the culture of the school was transformed as each class and the community came together to support a cohesive vision. As an offshoot of Janet's work the school later won a Golden Bell Award for their character education programs and community involvement.

What is your vision and passion? How can you be the change you wish to see? Be a change agent who contributes the best you have to offer. Be a change agent who accepts the best others have to give. Without change there is no transformation and without transformation there are no butterflies. Choose the ability to transform and soar.

## 33

## Laugh Every Day

**To relieve stress, connect to others, jumpstart your sense of humor and pure enjoyment take a laugh break.**

The small window of Joe Romagna's 5th grade classroom is always good for a daily laugh. Joe, formerly a radio disc jockey, understands how humor can open up learning. He's a great communicator, terrific teacher and always ready to share a pun, joke or fun phrase. He doesn't even use his class time to do this. A small white board perched in a window pane invites a daily laugh.

Recently, I walked by Joe's window and saw the following:

"What kind of ice cream does Dracula like?"

"Vein-illa!"

I could almost hear a "ba-dum-dum" as I passed his classroom.

Joe was my son Chase's teacher and he opened up a lot of learning through sharing humor daily. Each day my son would share the joke of the day when I came home and we would laugh together. Even now 2 years after leaving Mr. Romagna's class we walk by his classroom when walking our dog and read Joe's posted joke. It's a great reminder that laughter and learning like peanut butter and jelly make a great combination.

Silly jokes are more than just fun they make you think about creating your own which you can only do by understanding language. You have to know it well enough to manipulate double meanings, deftly coin a term or create an interesting phrase. What a great motivation for students to master vocabulary,



grammar and comprehension. It's also fun. When students want to go to school and enjoy it they accomplish more and so do you.

A good laugh is also the best stress reliever around. You don't even need a joke to laugh you just need a sense of humor. I love listening to kids and their perception of what's going on. Doing duty on the playground I overheard the following:

"We have to be good today because the Super Nintendo is visiting."

"Board Members are coming. I wonder why they're so bored."

"Our teacher said you would be visiting too. I thought you lived here."

"I heard we were having a sub today but our teacher wasn't here so we didn't have sandwiches."

"You're really tall Ms. G. I can see right up your nose."

Have you really looked for the humor in your everyday experiences or tried to consciously see the lighter side of situations? Just as some people get inspired by a quote of the day, a daily laugh can set a positive mood or lighten an otherwise difficult day. It's easy to grouse and get nods of agreement from other educators. Hard work and stress can get you down and shut off your sense of humor or your joy in teaching and learning. To relieve stress, connect with others, jumpstart your sense of humor and pure enjoyment take a laugh break. You can do this in a variety of ways but my favorite is to literally take a few minutes to laugh out loud from deep inside.

You can take a laugh break alone or with others that you have explained the process to. My son and I take one each evening. School can be hard on both of us for entirely different reasons. Our laugh breaks all started with Joe Romagna's posted jokes. Chase would share the joke in the evening and we would have a loud "rolling on the floor" laugh. The joke didn't even have to be funny. It was an excuse to laugh and sharing the laugh made everything even more enjoyable

The great thing about laughing is that it completely opens you up and relaxes you. You become more receptive to giving and receiving positive energy. Just as Joe invites a laugh I'm inviting you to choose to connect to your inner joy. Laugh daily and appreciate the humor that's all around you. You may even want to post a daily joke of your own just like Joe.

## 34

## Support Each Other

**If you want to continually grow and improve as an educator you'll support your colleagues and let them support you.**

My first day as a teacher, a colleague met me in the hall, looked me up and down and announced, "I give you until lunchtime before you take off like the others." With that happy greeting I walked into my first day as a brand new 6th grade teacher. There was no buddy teacher or on site support provider. There was no Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program. There was just the Grim Reaper who taught 3rd grade down the hall. Thank goodness not all my colleagues were like that.

Now, there are some great supports in place for new teachers and even experienced educators. In any case nothing beats having colleagues that are collegial and supportive. If it takes a village to raise a child it also takes a professional learning community to support teachers. Every teacher deserves support and should at the very least get it from colleagues.

As a Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) Site Coordinator I was lucky enough to train experienced teachers to be support providers for new teachers. I also got to work with new teachers directly as a mentor. I found that the best part about supporting other teachers is how much you can learn from them. New teachers are especially great to work with because having just finished their credentials they can share insights about the latest research and pedagogy.

Whether there is a formal support program you are involved in or you simply work to support your grade

level partners and fellow staff members remember you are all on the same team. Good teams support each other and great teams support and celebrate each other.

I learned about supporting colleagues from Alice Bullard who was also known as “The Goddess Guru of Training.” Admittedly, I was the one who gave Alice the nickname but it was because she was such a phenomenal BTSA leader. Alice really brought home the importance of providing personal and professional support for colleagues. She was a model for how to help others become thoughtful and reflective practitioners. Alice was always well prepared, unfailingly professional, an excellent presenter and a skilled facilitator and mentor. Just attending one of her meetings was a learning experience. Alice’s thorough preparation, obvious organization, attention to detail and built in evaluation processes showed everyone present how to run effective training sessions.

If you want to continually grow and improve as an educator you’ll support your colleagues and let them support you. If you see a need, reach to fill it. If you have need, ask for help. Sometimes asking someone for assistance helps them to grow. We all like to feel that we have something to offer others and when we go to help someone it can give us an opportunity to rethink how to do something more effectively.

When you support your colleagues you honor our profession. It’s an important action. My Grim Reaper came by my classroom every morning and at recess and lunch to tell me I was destined to fail. Imagine having a colleague like that in your first year. Although I ignored him, it hurt to have someone root so hard for my professional demise. When I ran into him years later and mentioned how upsetting his actions had been he looked stricken. He told me he thought he was helping me by telling me how hard the job would be.

When you support a colleague remember to do it positively in response to what they need not what you think they should get. Be careful and kind with each other. Sometimes, just like the song says: “We all need somebody to lean on.”

## 35

## Celebrate Success

**Celebrate all your successes. Recognize the positive in yourself and others and take joy in it.**

“Celebrate You,” is the title of a poem 4th grader Isabela Presedo Floyd gave me last Christmas. It’s good advice coming from a 10 year old who is also a published writer, animal advocate and dedicated dancer. Isabela is a great student and a wonderful human being. She’s smart, funny and kind. I enjoyed knowing her and she taught me a lot about being a better educator. The most important thing I learned from her was to acknowledge the things I was doing right. Although it helped that she listed them for me in her poem the realization that she recognized my efforts was the true success. Wouldn’t it be great if we could all embrace our successes the way a child can accept and appreciate who we are?

The different measures of accountability we face with mastering standards, raising test scores and closing the achievement gap let us know how we are doing by the numbers. This data is important and you should rejoice in any gains made. Please don’t forget however to also celebrate other types of successes.

Maybe it’s human nature to tick off a list of what’s not working. If you do this take the next step and list what you’re going to do about it and then do it. Celebrate that you’ve addressed the issues. Also, note each day what worked, who you were successful with, what you learned, the connections you made, the improvement that was observed. These are all successes.

It's also a success to:

- Laugh each day
- Enjoy your students
- Have meaningful connections with parents
- Collaborate with colleagues
- Take a risk
- Implement a new program, process or procedure
- Learn something new

Celebrate all your successes. Recognize the positive in yourself and others and take joy in it. Pass on that joy by celebrating your successes and sharing them at an appropriate time and place. Make it a habit to spread the good word about what's working for you with students in collaborative meetings or during staff meetings. Share your processes and best practices in a collegial manner. Your successful practices may help someone else.

Also make it a point to share successes at home. Leave any problems at school and just give your family the positive highlights of your day:

- Did you have a breakthrough with a student?
- Was your thoughtful, standards aligned lesson a hit?
- Were students on target when you walked through the room checking as they worked?
- Did something funny or surprising or wonderful happen?

When you start looking for and acknowledging your many successes celebrating each day will become a habit. It's important to nurture this practice which is really about choosing a positive perspective. It goes beyond choosing to see life as a glass that is half empty or half full and instead realizing that the glass is made of the finest crystal.

When you master the art of being positive and celebrating success it will sustain you no matter what challenges you face in the classroom. You can embrace who you are and what you do because you are one of the most important people on the planet. You are a teacher.

By being positive you can also acknowledge who your students are as people and celebrate that each of you is unique and none of you is perfect. You're not supposed to be perfect. You're human. You have the opportunity to learn every moment you live.

One of my kindergarten colleagues Michelle Sheik once told me, "Teaching is not about perfection, it's about love." Michelle, like Isabela knows how to celebrate life, learning and the positive aspects of herself and others. It makes her a phenomenal teacher who can recognize successes daily. You can do this too. Let go of the idea of perfect. Simply celebrate yourself and what's working.

## 36

**Make Meetings Meaningful**

**You can make meetings meaningful by participating positively in helping decide how meetings occur and through choosing to participate in a constructive and professional manner.**

Sometimes it feels like the only good meeting is a cancelled meeting. By my estimate, in a typical 60 hour week as an administrator, I attend a minimum of 32 hours a week in different meetings.

When your principal is missing in action they may be attending a variety of committee and other meetings including required management meetings. We are not out at a wonderful lunch. I haven't had lunch in 7 years. Imagine instead a near hostage situation otherwise known as a mandated meeting. In contrast to a weekly or bimonthly staff meeting at school which is often 60 minutes, principal meetings are often 3–5 hours long and occur regularly. These meetings have given me ample opportunity to observe what does and does not work in creating and running meaningful meetings.

Most school teams have regular staff meetings that are outlined in the contract. These are often weekly or bimonthly and usually are 60–90 minutes. Successful schools minimize informational meetings and maximize action oriented processes. Instead of using meetings to make announcements or give and go over forms they choose to send out e-mail bulletins and updates on a regular basis, define the scope of their meetings and calendar them for the year and set group norms. These agreements allow meetings to be used for active group discussion, decisions, collaboration and shared work. To be effective these meetings need to:

- Have an agenda
- Follow agreed upon norms
- Address relevant issues professionally
- Allow for respectful evaluation and feedback
- Start and end on time

The facilitator's job is to ensure the above meeting elements are in place and that everyone adheres to the meeting guidelines. Both the facilitator and participants need to work together to make meetings meaningful. As a participant and a meeting facilitator, I've observed certain types of participants who can throw meetings off track:

**Historians:** Individuals who are fond of the "We've always done it this way philosophy." Historians often make change difficult unless they instigate it.

**Contrarians:** Doesn't matter what it is, they don't like it. Often these individuals will bemoan that a meeting is taking place and then demand more meetings be scheduled to discuss the things they disagree on.

**Quick Change Artists:** These participants are like Contrarians and also have the ability to quickly change viewpoints if you or others agree or disagree with them.

**Passive Poseurs:** Masters of the thoughtful nod and sincere "Uh Hum," who still manage to convey disdain and keep the group from coming to agreement.

**Contortionists:** The flexibility they display is entirely physical and manifests itself as body language, facial expressions and movements that convey disapproval, dissatisfaction or disgust.

**Doodle Bugs:** Their body is present, their heart is detached and their mind is on the moon. The amount of damage they can do in a meeting often parallels the intricacy of their doodles.

**Silent but Deadlies:** Certainly the name says it all.

**Pah-tners:** The pair that exclaims "Pah!" and/or whispers back and forth that it, whatever it is, won't ever work. They will sometimes divide and conquer the room with a one-two strategy of negative input.

**The Special Forces Unit:** A group of like-minded individuals who always try to sit together and want to control outcomes.

Obviously the answer isn't more meetings. Instead it's better meetings where everyone is involved and things get done. Your time is important. You can make meetings meaningful by participating positively in helping to decide how meetings occur and through choosing to participate in a constructive and professional manner. Avoid meeting mania by calling colleagues on negative behaviors that derail meetings.

## 37

**Leave Personal Problems at Home**

**This is the hardest and most rewarding profession on earth. As a professional you have to be fully present and prepared at all times.**

There really is a time and place for everything. It's not always easy to define either when you are a busy professional. In terms of place, try to remember to leave home behind when you are at school. As you drive away from home in the morning consciously accept that it's the appropriate time to move away from any personal conflicts or issues. Release yourself from any guilt, tension, aggravation or personal concerns as you drive toward your professional obligations.

Think about what you are going to rather than what you are leaving behind. I'm not suggesting ignoring personal problems or issues. I'm advocating that you exercise discretion over where and when you deal with personal conflicts.

You work with children and they generally require complete and total attention. Students need your focus and they deserve it. As educators we serve students and the community. To enter into the teaching profession is in itself an implicit promise to be there for others. This is the hardest and most rewarding profession on earth. As a professional you have to be fully present and prepared at all times.

You also work with other teachers who may be dealing with their own personal conflicts. Colleagues need a drama free work place to do their best work and fully collaborate with you. Imagine if everyone came to work dragging a personal



problem with them. The weight of your collective negativity would sink the whole school into despair.

Of course you have a personal life and most likely may sometimes have personal problems. You're human, and it's perfectly reasonable that sometimes your life will intervene, you may become ill or a family member will need you. When this happens and you find you have a problem you can't leave behind please use sick leave, take a personal necessity day or if warranted a leave. It does no one any good for you to come to school sick, sad or unfocused. In fact, it's selfish because the kids will worry about you and that's not their job.

Parents may also begin to worry if they sense there is something amiss. First one parent will express a concern, then another until pretty soon they are having a meeting about you on the playground. Next, they're in my office asking what plan is in place to deal with your personal issues.

Colleagues also begin to get concerned and/or annoyed when personal issues consistently intrude on professional obligations. All of us will deal with a variety of serious life issues at one time or another and everyone can support and understand this however don't share every detail. It can put others in an uncomfortable position and cast you in an unfavorable light.

Sometimes the personal and professional collide and are public due to the nature of the personal issue. For one of the teachers I worked with, breast cancer, its treatment and visible side effects made her illness impossible to hide. Diane needed to keep working and wanted to keep working. Her personal challenge and the battle she was facing were very public but her choice of how she dealt with her illness was totally professional. Diane let people know what was going on with her, what the treatment and prognosis were and used her situation to teach and lead by example. She didn't frighten students, parents or colleagues but instead assured them that she was handling her illness. The choice to be positive and professional turned a challenging life situation into an important lesson in courage for everyone.

When the issues you need to leave behind are smaller, say an argument with a significant other, family concerns, a home repair that needs to be scheduled plan how you will address it later then let it go. Accept that the timing is off and leave it in its proper place at home.

## 38

## Get Free Stuff

**It's not a secret or even "The Secret," that the best strategy for getting anything free is to ask for it.**

Free is the best price I know. We are talking about free in the sense of something not costing you money. It may cost time, or energy and even a little creativity but many times you won't have to spend a dime.

It's not a secret or even "The Secret," that the best strategy for getting anything free is to ask for it. It's amazing how few people do. Kids don't hesitate to tell you what they want. It's all of us adults who limit ourselves or who half ask by wishing for something. Sometimes this works although you still get better results by just straight out asking.

Last year one of my teachers went to a technology conference and saw interactive SMART Boards being demonstrated. She was overheard wishing she had one by a vendor who offered her one to use in a pilot. When she asked me if it would be okay to pilot a board I said "Of course," and asked for the vendor's card. I called the company representative to find out about their pilot program and ended up asking for a board for each grade level. We were able to get the free use of seven interactive SMART Boards for an extended pilot period. Always ask for what you want.

When asking for free materials, services or resources try:

- Direct conversation
- A wish list in your class newsletter
- Postings on community bulletin boards and/or your class and school website

- Requests via e-mail to companies, vendors and company representatives
- Grant proposal requests

In addition to asking for what you want and/or need you must be ready to receive what is offered to you. Just as people love to get things for free others like to give. Private individuals may support you or the school because they can contribute money or goods but not time. Others can contribute time and as volunteers become aides in the classroom, offer enrichment programs or interventions. Vendors and company representatives offer free pilots because it gets their product out, often results in sales and/or referrals and is good business. Allow those that can the opportunity to contribute goods and services to you, students, your classroom and the school. When someone offers you something of value say "Yes, thank you so much!"

When you are open to asking for and receiving free things you will benefit in more ways than one. You will get something you in fact need. You can enter into an exchange that often helps everyone involved. Sometimes an ongoing relationship develops with a company representative, parent, volunteer or grant funder that will continue to support you, your classroom and the school.

Piloting materials is one of the best ways to get something for free. When you do a pilot you have the advantage of using something with an option to buy it. This is a great way to actually check out if the materials will work for you and is a responsible way to decide what to purchase with limited funds. Some programs, give piloting materials to teachers, others offer a reduced purchase price of as much as 50% when pilot items are purchased. There is no cost if after the pilot materials are returned.

Of all the free things out there one of the best is information. Education websites offer a range of free, quality information and inspiration. One of my favorites is the George Lucas Education Foundation which has an online magazine called "Edutopia." The site is a wealth of cutting edge examples of the best practices in education. It has multiple sources of information including great videos showing what's going on in a variety of schools.

## 39

**Collaborate with  
Colleagues**

**Collaborating well involves a commitment to working together to both challenge each other and support your common goals.**

Raise your hand if you've ever felt overworked, overwhelmed and underappreciated. If your hand isn't raised then you're probably not a teacher. Maybe you picked up this book out of curiosity. It could also be that you are a teacher but you're too tired to raise your hand. Perhaps you've been working extremely hard planning and teaching alone and you're isolated in your classroom. So let me suggest that you reach out to your colleagues and find useful ways to collaborate.

Collaborating well involves a commitment to working together to both challenge each other and support your common goals. Begin by getting to know each other personally and professionally. Know your own strengths and areas for improvement and acknowledge those of your team members. Build rapport outside of your classroom with your professional learning community in the same way you seek to build it within your classroom with students. In other words, interact, make connections, negotiate and problem solve respectfully. Involve and honor everyone. Do this with grade level partners, other teachers, specialists and your administrator. The benefits of working together can save you time, build your capacity as an educator, improve your class, grade level and school.

How do you find the time to collaborate? It helps to utilize all available built in collaboration time. Late start or early release days are often designated for staff development and collaboration. Be proactive about using these times to focus in on shared work

and learning. There are also weekly set staff meetings that are mandated either by mutual agreement and/or contract. Discuss as a school team if some mandated meeting times can be used for grade level and across grade level collaboration. Utilize time together to:

- Analyze data
- Address pacing guides
- Map curriculum
- Plan collectively
- Share strategies
- Learn together
- Enjoy each other

In addition to using standard collaboration times get creative and look at how you can work together within your day. Collaboration can be an integral part of how you work to provide better support for students while also sharing the work and growing as professionals. A few suggestions for this kind of collaboration are to:

- Consider inviting your administrator to support collaboration by taking your class or classes. This can free you up to do peer teaching and modeling or provide peer observation and feedback to one or more colleagues.
- Plan push-in interventions with specialists whenever possible to promote full inclusion as well as having the opportunity to learn from the specialists you work with while teaching together.
- Double up and team teach with a grade level partner. This is a great way to address the range of student needs while supporting each other.
- Work with another grade level to set up a Buddy Program that allows older students to mentor younger students. This will build leadership in your students while allowing each grade level to collaborate on meaningful teaching and learning for all.

Remember collaboration is not coercion. It's a concert with each player contributing to create a result that is better than any single individual. I worked with a very diverse team when I taught 1st grade. One of us was abstract and creative, another precise, detail oriented and sequential and the last centered, opinionated and domineering. It could have been a total disaster except that we each knew who we were as individuals and team members. No one insisted anyone be like them. Each of us accepted each other's strengths and owned our own weaknesses. As a result we all learned from each other, were less isolated and became better teachers through sharing our work in depth.

If you want to lessen your individual work load, cut down on the overwhelming demands of teaching and foster mutual appreciation collaborate with colleagues. Do it for yourself, your colleagues and most of all for students.

## 40

## Find Your Center

**If you are centered nothing can knock you down, surprise you or overwhelm you.**

Sometimes does your life feel like a fairy tale? You spin a room full of straw into gold and what do you get? You're rewarded with a larger room. In the rush of all you do maybe you skip breakfast, grab a coffee and hit the road. Rushing however is not really going to solve anything. Rushing is tension inducing and pretty soon you're frazzled. Sometimes this continues throughout the day until you drop into bed at night too tired to dream. You need to find your center.

Stop and take the time to care for yourself. You'd never treat anyone as badly as you treat yourself so shape up and slow everything down. Schedule some relaxation time and begin each morning waking slowly, stretching languidly and breathing deeply. Totally relax and slowly get up.

Take a minute to "write the blight," which is a way of releasing any inner anxiety in a quick write journal format. Just write quickly and without thinking to release any nagging anxieties. "X@#""! It doesn't matter what you write as you're clearing the way to ease into the day. Along with eating breakfast, a negative energy release can help you arrive at work calm, composed and ready for anything.

Make sure to get to work with time to spare so you can take a breath before beginning your day. Consciously center yourself and repeat the exercise during transition breaks. You are practicing how to be in sync with the present at any given moment. With practice you will become automatically

centered. This helps create a calm place from which to address problems in a 360 degree manner.

If you are centered nothing can knock you down, surprise you or overwhelm you. You can access multiple viewpoints from your central perspective. If a student, parent or colleague has an issue you can listen to it, examine it and respond to it calmly. Certainly this is worth practicing.

In your classroom being centered will allow you to feel comfortable managing with movement. You'll feel fine walking through the class observing and monitoring students. When you are fully present and relaxed you'll enjoy working with students even more.

Being centered is different from being merely comfortable. To be centered is to anchor yourself in awareness at any given time. It's being fully present in each moment. Centering yourself is a sort of a psychic pilates where you are working on your emotional core.

When you can consistently center yourself you can help students find their centers through the choices you make in class. I used to have a morning ritual for students to come in, put their things away and pull a book out of their leveled book boxes to do independent reading. This would last only a few minutes. Then we would do a couple breathing exercises and guided movements before going over the daily agenda and getting started for the day.

I've seen teachers do a variety of things to help students center themselves. Some actions have included:

- Doing yoga
- Participating in a short song and dance
- Having the class take a lap
- Doing a group stretch

Throughout the day give yourself a mental stretch when you need it. Stop, breathe and center yourself. Build in opportunities for your students to do this also especially after transitions. We're talking about a brief moment where you may recap the lesson covered or the one you are introducing. This offers an ease of transition so no one feels like they are going from one thing to the next without stopping to breathe. At the end of the day build in closure to remind students of what they have learned and any assignments they will be doing at home. When they leave take a moment to reflect on your day and recognize what went well or could be improved.

## 41

## D. E. A. R. Time

**Make sure to set a schedule for yourself to start and stop each day at a particular time. Guess what, the work will not walk away.**

Drop everything and relax! Not during class but at the end of the day. Leave the building and don't take work with you. My first couple of years as a teacher I took home work daily. I just felt overwhelmed and thought if I worked harder and longer I'd get everything done. Honestly, I got so tired sometimes I left it in the car and took it all back to school the next day. It took me awhile to realize I could save time and energy by just leaving it at school.

Come on, no one can work all the time.

You do a hard job. You need time for yourself outside school. Make sure to set a schedule for yourself to start and stop each day at a particular time. Guess what, the work will not walk away. It'll wait till you come back for it and you'll actually be more efficient when you've had some time to yourself.

Be careful that you don't bring all the children home with you either. When you know and care about your students they have a way staying on your mind even after you've left school. Instead try using a daily documentation strategy that notes observations, issues and possible solutions before you leave each day. The proactive strategy of writing down anecdotal notes will let you anchor issues at school before you head home. We are talking about a few minutes of time tops.

Actively switch gears by listening to enjoyable music or books on tape as you drive home. Although



you may prefer silence you might benefit from having an automatic way to shut off any inner voice nagging you to worry or problem solve. If you live close enough to school to walk take the scenic route. In either case release the day as you leave your site. Let go of everything and breathe.

Don't look back.

I know it's easy to think and talk about school and your students. I grew up with teacher talk and have been guilty of perpetuating it in my own home. It may not be possible to have a duty free dinner where you don't at least in passing talk about school however be aware of how much you share. The more you can leave school behind when you are at home the better rested you will be.

Try taking 10 to 15 minutes each night to just be still. Meditate, breathe and relax.

As a professional educator you are caring for others all the time. Remember to care for yourself as well by:

- Eating well
- Staying hydrated
- Taking your scheduled breaks
- Exercising
- Pursuing outside interests
- Rewarding yourself to reconnect to personal health and well being

A few favorite ways to relax and reward yourself might include taking time to:

- Get a manicure
- Have a pedicure
- Schedule a facial
- Get a massage
- Have your hair done

These aren't just activities that women educators enjoy as I found out one day when I went to get my hair highlighted. I heard a familiar masculine voice in the next salon chair and spun around to find myself face to face with Kevin, the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. Both of us were sheathed in plastic capes and sporting cotton and foil headgear. We both had a good laugh which in the end is the best way of all to drop everything and relax. When you care for yourself and enjoy life the calm it brings you will allow you to connect with your students more effectively.

R u l e

42

## These Are My Rules What Are Yours?

**Teachers are  
truly hardworking  
heroes.**

Hopefully the rules I've shared will be useful to you. Perhaps they will make you think about your own. Anyone who works in education knows that the rules are always changing. The one constant seems to be continual change. I've been lucky to know and work with phenomenal educators who have shared their experience and passion and modeled effective best practices. The rules presented come from these teachers as well as from my own experiences. What can you add?

Teachers are truly hardworking heroes. I know this on a deep and personal level which is why I'd love to know what works for you when you have a free moment. I invite you to share your thoughts by contacting me at my blog: <http://42rules.com/elementaryschoolteachers>.

Are there some great rules that work for you and can help other teachers?

Let's keep learning and growing together.



## About the Author



Susan Guerrero is passionate about teaching and learning. A K-12 teacher, specialist, staff developer, university instructor, principal, and educational ambassador, Susan is an advocate for parents, students, and teachers. She is the Executive Director of The Heart of Learning Foundation and lives in Pleasanton, California with her son and daughter.



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