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Getting Started

“I’m always stirred by the tremendous decency and kindness of teachers. They are good, solid human beings who do their jobs day after day with love and affection. Their work is not proficiency and outcome, it’s poetry and ministry.”

—Jonathan Kozol



This book is a love letter to new teachers. By new, I mean anyone with fewer than five years' experience. And by a love letter, I mean an acknowledgment that you probably haven't received anywhere near the credit you deserve for finding the courage to become a teacher. I'll bet plenty of loved ones tried to talk you out of it. Yet you forged ahead. That took pluck, daring, valor . . . even a kind of heroism.

So I want to begin by providing some reassurance that whatever difficulties you may encounter probably aren't due to what you'd otherwise think were your own personal shortcomings. Take my word for it: rough moments happen to all of us. Yet we survive—and thrive. So will you.

Much has changed since I began my career in 1968. Back then, first-year teachers were thrown to the wolves with little or no guidance and then left to thrash about desperately on their own with no intervention. Today, because you receive far more rigorous and intensive preparation than we did, along with plenty of classroom monitoring early on, you might assume that the day-to-day realities of the profession would feel far less like being doused with repeated buckets of cold water.

But I doubt it.

No beginning teacher can be anything less than shocked at finding his lunch break so short that it's impossible to check his mailbox, go to the restroom, *and* scarf down a hot dog. (He must choose one, perhaps two out of three.) Or that if his school is not air-conditioned (many still



aren't), heat waves and indoor temperatures reaching ninety-five to a hundred degrees can linger through late October. Or that every weekend will likely be spent grading, bookkeeping, and lesson planning.

During your first few months in the classroom, the disillusionment factor can be huge. There are so many students to meet and get to know, so many lessons to prepare in excruciating detail (some principals require that plans be turned in a week in advance), so many baffling dictates to follow ("During a fire drill, exit through the east door." *Which way is east?*).

But I believe that disillusionment leads to dropping out only when you feel as if the problems are yours alone. This book is a testament to the fact that you are most definitely not alone. After reading it, you'll never again say, "I thought it was just me."

My intention here is to alert you to the thorny issues that no one else wants to talk about. I often call them educational blasphemy, because bringing them up usually results in killing the messenger, or at least a venomous verbal attack designed to shut him up forever.

Some may accuse me of sounding cynical. But I want to shed a bright light and save you years of grinding your teeth in frustration by learning everything the hard way. So here you'll find an acknowledgment of a problem—followed by a reassurance, an anecdote, or in most cases, a remedy.

I hope this book will help you feel less isolated and more turbocharged, more convinced than ever that teaching is your true calling. And I hope that someday, long before you've completed your thirty-year stellar career with your mental and physical health still intact, you too will have lots of funny, tragic, heartwarming tales to tell.

Meanwhile, here's my first advice nugget. It may well be the most essential one of all.





Never lose sight of your own power.

Teaching in our K–12 schools is the world’s noblest, most important, most invigorating, and most satisfying job. But you’ll have moments when you’ll feel whipped, drained, stranded, defenseless, used up, and spit out. And utterly, completely powerless.

That last word, *powerless*, is the one I want to contradict. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The most essential component of effective education isn’t a sparkling new classroom. It isn’t spacious whiteboards, computer technology, or updated textbooks. It isn’t plenty of glistening, sturdy desks or freshly painted walls. Although such accoutrements are certainly wonderful, there’s only one variable that’s absolutely essential to the learning process: you. The teacher.



You are where every lesson begins and ends. You run the show. You set the tone. You create the camaraderie. You dictate whether your kids look forward to your class—or loathe it. You can be either a soothing, reassuring influence—or a sniping, critical one. You can, in fact, save a child’s life; if not physically, then surely emotionally and intellectually. Or you can let her fall through the cracks.



“ I touch the future. I teach.
—CHRISTA MCAULIFFE ”

The choice is yours. And although for most of us it’s an easy one to make, its daily implementation will continually be a challenge. Despite your best intentions, you’ll be crippled by a shortage of time and energy, frazzled by constant interruptions, frustrated by students who huff that they’d rather be anywhere else but in school, and infuriated by taxpayers who think that teachers only work part-time.





Yet somehow, thousands upon thousands of us rise above such handicaps and misconceptions. No wonder observers are awestruck when they realize they're watching (or once, long ago, had the privilege of watching) a truly talented classroom presence. On some level, they must realize how much self-assurance, dedication, charisma, and hard work that requires.

As for us, we understand what a privilege it is.

No wonder so many professionals in other fields confess that they always secretly yearned to be teachers. There is no more powerful place to be than in a classroom, where mutual esteem and genuine affection between a teacher and his or her students are palpable.

It's often said that a child is lucky if she encounters one dynamic, inspiring teacher during her entire twelve years of school. That's the bad news. The good news is . . . one is all it takes to change everything.

Wouldn't it be awesome if that one turned out to be *you*?



