

## SECTION ONE

# Begin Your Professional Journey

**W**hen you decided to become an educator, you entered a very special universe—one where your insights, energy, kindness, knowledge, and skills can be used to change the world. Change the world? Yes, that is what educators do. Just think of what a career in education means to you and to the millions of teachers who are your colleagues across the globe. Think carefully about why you want to be a teacher and carry your “why” throughout your career. Periodically revisiting your “why” will provide you with clarity and inspiration.

Teachers make all other professions possible. It’s true, teaching is that important. Countless studies indicate that teachers are the most significant school-based factor influencing student achievement. It is teachers who get to know students, inspire them to become lifelong learners, and to believe in their ability to achieve their dreams.

It is teachers who build relationships with students and create engaging, inclusive learning communities. With teachers, students learn the knowledge and skills for self-expression and problem-solving. With teachers, students expand their horizons and discover their interests, learn to read, write, think mathematically, explore their questions, cooperate, and collaborate with others. It is a teacher who builds a safe, respectful culture that affirms students and protects them from bullies. It is a teacher who provides the first line of defense in the battle against ignorance, poverty, and discrimination in all its forms. It is a teacher who, in partnership with families, helps young people learn how to navigate life. To be kind. To be successful. To accomplish dreams. To be good citizens of the world.

What a weighty responsibility we face each school day. What a privilege it is to be an educator.

Few careers can claim to have such a powerful impact as a career in education. Teachers do change the world—one student, one classroom, one school at a time. Never doubt that, even on the toughest days, you make a difference in the lives of your students. What you do *matters*.

Congratulations on your choice of professions! We welcome you.

## How to Handle Your New Responsibilities

If you are like most new teachers, you may already be concerned about how well you will handle the responsibilities that accompany managing a classroom filled with a diverse population of students—each one with unique needs, interests, and abilities. Just how do successful teachers keep those responsibilities from becoming overwhelming?

Teachers take it one day at a time. They work to maintain a balance between their personal and professional lives by paying careful attention to their own well-being. Teachers manage their professional challenges by realizing that they are not alone in their struggles and that it's okay to not always know the best solution to a problem. They reach out to a colleague next door or down the hall or in an online professional community to seek help. And even when they are dealing with the pressing details of each school day, effective teachers stay focused on what really matters—the success of their students.

All teachers experience professional challenges. First-year teachers, experienced teachers, and teachers at every grade level cope with complex problems, no matter how ideal their school situation. Anytime you feel overwhelmed, remember that you are not alone and it's likely that others have faced what you're going through. In fact, here are some of the most common challenges that teachers experience:

- Finding a sustainable work-life balance
- Meeting a wide range of students' academic needs
- Addressing students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs
- Planning and implementing engaging lessons
- Lacking time and resources
- Connecting with families and caregivers
- Integrating learning technology
- Completing paperwork/administrative tasks
- Keeping up with new initiatives
- Experiencing external pressures



If some of these problems seem all too familiar, remember that the hallmark of a great teacher is not the absence of problems but the ability to generate and implement innovative and effective solutions to an array of classroom challenges. With a positive attitude, a professional approach, a bit of creativity, collaboration with colleagues and plenty of practice, you will soon be able to manage your new professional responsibilities.

## Develop the Mindset of a “Professional” Educator

Although many educators use the term *professionalism* when referring to teachers they respect, it can be a vague, complex, and sometimes biased term. Does it mean stand-offish and unapproachable? Absolutely not. Professional educators come from a wide-range of backgrounds and identities. Each state has its own professional code for teachers.

Make sure to read yours. They are all a bit different, so let's start with a description.

Professional educators are effective teachers who embody the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to reach and teach all learners. Some of the many attributes educators use to describe professional educators include: caring, intentional, dedicated, effective, knowledgeable, inclusive, collaborative, always learning new things, organized, respectful of students and others, integrous, ethical, and taking pride in their work.

When you choose to develop the mindset of a professional educator, it infuses all aspects of the way you go about the business of teaching. You send the message that you care deeply, have high expectations for yourself, for others, and for what you can accomplish together.

"I do everything I can to make my students feel successful, safe, and cared for. That means arriving before the expected time so that the classroom is organized and ready for students. It means having lessons thought through and implemented effectively. It means modeling for my students good behavior, thoughtfulness, and a positive outlook."

*Betsy Jones, 12 years' experience*

## What's Expected of Professional Teachers

So much is expected of teachers. Society often expects too much and you are not expected to know how to do everything your first year. As a teacher, you will be expected not only to maintain a well-managed classroom, but also to establish a classroom culture of mutual respect and high performance with your students. All teachers, no matter what subject matter they teach or the age and ability levels of their students, are expected to create this culture in their classes. Although this can seem difficult at first, this expectation can make your life as a teacher much more rewarding as you watch your students learn and grow. How will you know when you have created the positive learning environment that you want for your students?

- Teachers know students well and have developed authentic two-way communication with their families and caregivers.
- The classroom is student-centered, with students taking ownership of their learning and responsibility for their success.
- Students are curious and interested in learning, fully engaged in meaningful, respectful, and appropriate work.
- Teachers model taking risks in learning themselves, making students feel safe to take risks in learning, too.
- Teachers integrate technology that provides multiple ways for students to express themselves and problem solve.
- Students can explain to visitors what they are doing and why they are doing it.
- Students can self-assess the quality of their work and describe what they want to learn next.

- The teacher has routines and agreements in place so that students feel a sense of belonging and confidence about expectations for learning, social interactions, and self-regulated behaviors.
- The teacher uses current research and best practices to inform instructional decisions.
- The teacher makes instructional decisions based on genuine understanding of their students and a thoughtful analysis of available data.
- Students learn and grow, demonstrating proficiency of knowledge and skills, and have some voice and choice to pursue their questions.
- Students and teachers celebrate successes, share feedback, and learn from failures together.

Creating a positive classroom culture is not a task that can be done in a day or two, but rather requires consistent and sustained effort. It begins with building relationships, maintaining high expectations, and high levels of support for your students. Make sure that these expectations and goals are ones that students also value and perceive as achievable.

Knowledgeable teachers have found that it is impossible to create a positive classroom environment without encouraging collaboration. Students who work together learn to support one another. Successful teachers also focus on helping students understand the real world connections to their studies and the importance of practice and effort in achieving success.

Finally, where there is a positive classroom culture, the students and their teachers take the time to celebrate their successes as well as learn from their failures. The culture of this type of classroom is genuine, positive, and conducive to learning and growing.

Even though the expectation that you will create a positive classroom culture can be daunting at first, it is a worthy goal with far-reaching rewards. Start with building community. Plan carefully and with the needs and interests of your students and the greater school community in mind. Others have achieved this. You can as well.

## Professional Growth: Find Your People

Expanding your Professional Learning Network (PLN) is one of the best ways to inspire your growth as a teacher. It's important not to work in isolation, but to connect with teachers near and far, in your grade level or subject areas, with whom you can explore challenges and new ideas. Find a PLN where you can share your authentic experiences, bring your full self to the work, and both get and give support. With a PLN, you will continuously improve your practice, avoid burnout, and sustain your enthusiasm for teaching. There are endless ways to connect with educators who will inspire you at school, in the region, across the country, and around the world. Consider the best way for you to connect such as:

- Grade Level/Department Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
- Social Media
- State and National Associations and Conferences

## Establish Your Own Professional Learning Network

Many teachers use social media to create a professional learning network (PLN). This is simply a way for individuals to connect with other educators to collaborate, share ideas, and explore common professional interests. Various platforms will come and go, but there

will always be a group to join or content creator to follow for most grade levels and subject areas. Many educators who want to establish a PLN also engage with podcasts, websites, and blogs with content they want to explore further.

“The most important thing you can do in your first year is find people whose approach to teaching you respect, then spend as much time as you can with them. This one decision will have greater impact than any other move you can make.”

Jennifer Gonzalez, *Cult of Pedagogy*,  
[www.cultofpedagogy.com](http://www.cultofpedagogy.com)

## EDUCATOR PODCASTS, WEBSITES, AND BLOGS

There are so many educators sharing inspiring and thought-provoking content. Following a few educators can help you keep up with educational trends while learning about new resources, perspectives, and strategies. The following are just a few possibilities:

**BAM Radio Network ([bamradionetwork.com](http://bamradionetwork.com)):** This site provides a hub for a wide variety of podcasts and blogs for educators to explore, including ASCD, Ed Week, ISTE, and many individual educators sharing wisdom.

**Black on Black Education ([BlackonBlackEducation.com](http://BlackonBlackEducation.com)):** Evalaurene Jean-Charles is a high school teacher, and host of this podcast where she discusses the transformation of education in Black communities. She is also a consultant supporting schools to engage student voice and student-centered practices to enhance school and classroom culture.

**Cult of Pedagogy ([cultofpedagogy.com](http://cultofpedagogy.com)):** With this site, Jennifer Gonzalez creates a vibrant community of teachers through her podcast, blogs, and EduTips, offering immediately usable strategies, discussions of theory, and explorations of the soul of education.

**Culture-Centered Classroom ([customteachingsolutions.com](http://customteachingsolutions.com)):** Jocelynn Hubbard, host of The Culture-Centered Classroom podcast and founder of Custom Teaching Solutions, helps teachers spark joy with practical strategies and inspiration for creating inclusive, equitable, and welcoming learning environments.

**Larry Ferlazzo ([larryferlazzo.edublogs.org](http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org)):** A prolific contributor to national publications, Larry Ferlazzo is a teacher offering insightful blogs. He also writes a blog for *Education Week* called Classroom Q&A.

**Leading Equity Podcast ([leadingequitycenter.com](http://leadingequitycenter.com)):** Dr. Sheldon L. Eakins interviews leading voices in educational equity focusing on supporting educators to ensure equity in their schools.

**Mindful Math Podcast ([mindfulmathcoach.com](http://mindfulmathcoach.com)):** As a former instructional coach, Chrissy Allison provides practical advice for math educators, including instructional strategies, time-saving tricks, and lessons learned.

**Modern Classrooms Project Podcast ([modernclassrooms.org](http://modernclassrooms.org)):** Each episode explores aspects of the MCP with teachers implementing this innovative model, which includes blended instruction, self-pacing, and mastery-based learning.

**Reimagine Schools Podcast ([reimagineschoolsnow.com](http://reimagineschoolsnow.com)):** Dr. Greg Goins hosts this podcast featuring many of the nation's top educators, authors, and innovators in K-12 education.

**Teach Like a Champion ([teachlikeachampion.org](http://teachlikeachampion.org)):** Author Doug Lemov provides a blog, units of study, videos, and insights based on his best-selling book and many other topics that can help you grow as an educator.

**STEM4Real ([stem4real.org](http://stem4real.org)):** On this podcast, Dr. Leena Bakshi McLean interviews educators and thinkers exploring culturally relevant STEM instructional strategies so that every child can see themselves in a STEM field.

**Truth for Teachers ([truthforteachers.com](http://truthforteachers.com)):** Angela Watson offers an incredible collection of articles, podcast episodes, online courses, books, and curriculum with valuable advice and encouragement about many of the challenges facing classroom teachers. The 40 Hour Teacher Workweek program ([join.40htw.com](http://join.40htw.com)) focuses on how to maximize your work week so you are not working endlessly on evenings and weekends.

**World Language Classroom Podcast ([wlclassroom.com](http://wlclassroom.com)):** Joshua Cabral provides tips, tools, and resources for world language teachers to support students' proficiency and help them communicate with confidence.

## Develop Your Skills and Add to Your Knowledge

Feed your intellect; as a teacher, you will become a lifelong learner just by the very nature of the profession. It is simply impossible to be an effective teacher and not learn and grow yourself. It's also important that teachers have voice, choice, and agency in selecting professional development that is relevant and meaningful.

While school and district leaders provide professional development opportunities, proactive educators determine the professional development activities that serve them best. Becoming a teacher who is actively involved in a program of self-directed, sustained professional development is one of the wisest decisions you can make as a novice educator.

Fortunately, there are many different professional development opportunities available for interested teachers. As you begin to take ownership of this important aspect of your new career, you may want to consider some of the options on the following pages. Learning to use the resources available to you is a productive step in your quest to develop into the kind of teacher you dream of becoming.

## Attend Conferences

As a first-year teacher, you may not believe that attending a professional conference is a good use of your time when you have so much work to do and preparing for or even finding a sub can be a struggle. You may be right. If, however, your school district offers you an opportunity to attend a conference, consider accepting it. You'll benefit from the opportunity to learn new strategies and network with other professionals. Virtual conferences are often free and easily accessible. Recordings are commonly available for you to learn asynchronously. By following teachers and authors you respect on social media, you will learn about lots of virtual opportunities for learning and connecting with other educators. Conferences come in various formats from virtual to in-person, from edcamps to state and national conferences.

## Participate in an Edcamp

An important part of proactive professional development are edcamps (often referred to as *unconferences*). They are free and open to educators, participant-driven gatherings where K-12 educators informally develop topics and determine facilitators to share ideas and concerns with other educators in an inclusive and friendly environment. You can learn more about edcamps that would benefit you most from the Edcamp Foundation ([edcamp.org](http://edcamp.org)).

## Join Professional Organizations

One of the best ways to acclimate to your new profession is to join an organization for education professionals. Joining a professional association is an excellent way to stay current with the latest developments and trends in education. Most of them also host state and national conferences. Through collaboration and networking, you learn from other teachers with shared interests.

Two of the largest and most well-established professional associations have merged. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, [ascd.org](http://ascd.org)) and International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, [iste.org](http://iste.org)) have joined forces. They both provide robust support to educators with websites, blogs, newsletters, professional development courses, magazines, books, conferences, and certifications. Content from the newsletters and blogs is free. ASCD has a new teacher collection and Quick Reference Guides providing high-quality, easy-to-read tools and tips on topics such as differentiation, The Whole Child approach, backward design, gradual release, and more. ISTE standards and recommended

“Teaching can feel a little lonely when you are in the walls of your own classroom every day. The ISTE PLN Community can connect you to others with similar interests and experiences to explore what is possible together, wherever they may be. It allows you to make real connections around the world with colleagues who inspire your practice and can become your lifelong friends.”

Joseph South, Chief Innovation Officer,  
ASCD/ISTE

practices support teachers to use technology to transform teaching and learning. ISTE's resources on artificial intelligence (AI) give much needed guidance to educators about the ways AI can empower teachers and learners.

Here is a partial list of some of the many professional organizations for teachers:

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) ([actfl.org](http://actfl.org))
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT) ([aft.org](http://aft.org))
- Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) ([acteonline.org](http://acteonline.org))
- Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) ([amle.org](http://amle.org))
- Center for Black Educator Development ([thecenterblacked.org](http://thecenterblacked.org))
- Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) ([essentialschools.org](http://essentialschools.org))
- Educational Theatre Association (EdTA) ([schooltheatre.org](http://schooltheatre.org))
- National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) ([nabse.org](http://nabse.org))
- National Art Education Association (NAEA) ([arteducators.org](http://arteducators.org))
- National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) ([nabe.org](http://nabe.org))
- National Association for Career & Technical Education Information (NACTEI) ([nactei.org](http://nactei.org))
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) ([naeyc.org](http://naeyc.org))
- National Association for Music Education (NAfME) ([nafme.org](http://nafme.org))
- National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) ([socialstudies.org](http://socialstudies.org))
- National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) ([ncte.org](http://ncte.org))
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) ([nctm.org](http://nctm.org))
- National Education Association (NEA) ([nea.org](http://nea.org))
- National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) ([nsta.org](http://nsta.org))
- Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages International Association (TESOL) ([tesol.org](http://tesol.org))
- National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET) ([naset.org](http://naset.org))

## Read Professional Journals

Just as attending conferences can help you develop professional expertise, so can reading professional journals. Through such reading, you can learn a great deal about the interests you share with others in your field. Many of the preceding professional organizations have journals. Subscribing to one of these journals, websites, or newsletters will enrich your teaching experience in many ways:

***Educational Leadership (EL)* ([ascd.org](http://ascd.org)):** This journal is the voice of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and a useful resource for teachers at all grade levels. Here, you can find professional resources for your classroom as well as for schoolwide issues.

***Education Week* ([edweek.com](http://edweek.com)):** This journal is a weekly periodical devoted to up-to-the-minute news and commentary about education-related topics.

**Kappan (kappanonline.org):** This professional journal produced by the international organization for teachers, Phi Delta Kappa, addresses issues of policy and serves as a forum for debates on controversial subjects.

**Learning for Justice (learningforjustice.org):** Formerly known as *Teaching Tolerance*, *Learning for Justice* provides articles and strategies to help teachers address current social justice issues, and promote equity and inclusion in education.

“Being an educator is incredibly demanding and multifaceted work. It’s important for new educators to appreciate the intellectual dimensions of this work and to read deeply and seek out the best resources and mentors. Curiosity can be a big difference maker in your growth.”

Anthony Rebola, Chief Content Officer,  
ASCD/ISTE

## Investigate National Board Certification

You have a lot to do as a first-year teacher, and national board certification is a rigorous and intensive process. Teachers must complete three years of experience in order to finalize certification, but it’s still good to know this exists and consider it for the future. You can learn more at the website of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (nbpts.org).

## Twenty-Two Educational Websites to Explore

Websites offering free and paid tech tools, templates, resources, blogs, and instructional materials have expanded significantly. It’s vital that teachers share their collective wisdom to inspire teachers and engage students. From elaborate and carefully curated sites to more humble offerings, online resources can save teachers time and money.

Teachers must, however, select supplemental resources with care, considering your learning purpose, knowing the needs of your students, and choosing high-quality resources. The following are 22 websites you may choose to explore. All of them have free resources and unless otherwise noted, they apply to all grades, Pre-K–12. In addition, a few have paid options and fees for available services.

**Annenberg Learner (learner.org):** Multimedia resources and professional development for all grades and subjects.

**Audubon for Kids (audubon.org/get-outside/activities/audubon-for-kids):** Bird-related lesson plans and activities.

**Code.org (code.org):** Resources to teach coding and computer science.

**Common Lit (commonlit.org/en):** More than 2,000 ELA resources, reading passages, and assessments for grades 3–12.

**Education World (educationworld.com):** News briefs, lesson plans, education tips, reviews, and professional development.

**Edutopia (edutopia.org):** Timely articles, sage advice, videos, and a wide range of materials.

**EverFi (everfi.com/k-12/financial-education):** Online financial education curriculum.

- Facing History and Ourselves ([facinghistory.org](http://facinghistory.org)):** Offers lessons and professional development to help teachers teach social studies, civics, and current events in middle and high school. This unique approach deepens students' understanding of how their choices and actions shape the future.
- Kennedy Center Education ([kennedy-center.org/education](http://kennedy-center.org/education)):** Resident artist videos, lesson plans, digital resource library, and more to teach or integrate the Arts.
- Khan Academy (grades 2 and up) and Khan Academy Kids (below grade 2) ([khanacademy.org](http://khanacademy.org)):** (also [learn.khanacademy.org/khan-academy-kids](http://learn.khanacademy.org/khan-academy-kids)) Free instructional videos, personalized learning, and skill practice, including test prep.
- Library of Congress ([loc.gov/education](http://loc.gov/education)):** Free classroom materials, primary source documents, lesson plans, and presentations for grades 6–12.
- MiddleWeb ([middleweb.com](http://middleweb.com)):** Resources, articles, and useful advice for middle school teachers.
- NASA Science Space Place ([spaceplace.nasa.gov](http://spaceplace.nasa.gov)):** Online science activities, games, articles, and videos for upper-elementary grades.
- National Gallery of Art ([nga.gov/learn/teachers.html](http://nga.gov/learn/teachers.html)):** Lesson ideas, teaching resources and professional development to incorporate art.
- National Geographic ([nationalgeographic.org/society/education-resources](http://nationalgeographic.org/society/education-resources)):** Virtual, live, and recorded visits with explorers, maps, resources, and online courses.
- Open Education Resources (OER) Commons ([oercommons.org/curated-collections](http://oercommons.org/curated-collections)):** Digital library of 50,000+ instructional resources, videos, mini-lessons, textbooks, lesson plans, and activities, all on a highly collaborative platform.
- PBS Learning Media ([pbslearningmedia.org](http://pbslearningmedia.org)):** Videos, lesson plans, and more from the Public Broadcasting Service.
- Read Write Think ([readwritethink.org](http://readwritethink.org)):** Resources from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) for reading and language arts instruction.
- Share My Lesson ([sharemylesson.com](http://sharemylesson.com)):** More than 400,000 lesson plans, activities, and other resources shared by members of the American Federation of Teachers.
- Smithsonian History Explorer ([historyexplorer.si.edu](http://historyexplorer.si.edu)):** American history artifacts, lessons, activities, media, and primary source materials from the Smithsonian Museum of American History.
- Teachers Pay Teachers (TPT) ([teacherspayteachers.com](http://teacherspayteachers.com)):** Over 8 million free and paid digital and printable resources for every grade level and subject area.
- We Are Teachers ([weareteachers.com](http://weareteachers.com)):** Through this online community for teachers, MDR Education provides teacher-teacher advice, lesson ideas, printables, giveaways, and more.

## Take Learning Walks and Make Snapshot Observations

Although it is not always easy to find the time to visit other teachers' classrooms, the benefits of this practice are significant. You will witness another teacher's craft, their strategies, routines, student interactions, use of furniture and wall space, and more. Each school has a

different culture. Hopefully you, your colleagues, and students welcome visitors frequently and in a way that does not disrupt learning. Observations and visits can be more or less formal depending on your goals.

A *learning walk* usually takes place when you and a colleague visit another teacher's classroom to observe a few minutes of class and then share your observations. A *snapshot observation* usually involves the same procedure but without a partner. Both techniques are excellent ways to learn new strategies and techniques from colleagues.

When you arrange either a learning walk or a snapshot observation, first ask permission of the colleague you want to observe to arrange a day and time and to discuss where you should sit. Usually, a brief ten-minute visit is sufficient to gather information about a specific aspect of the class that you are interested in. While you are in the room, be respectful of that teacher's work by sitting in an unobtrusive spot and taking notes without interacting with students. Enter and leave the classroom as quietly as possible, unless your colleague has asked you to interact with students.

Both learning walks and snapshots are especially good ways to learn more about how your colleagues create community, facilitate learning, manage the opening and ending of class, transitions, direct instruction, classroom routines, group work, and assessments. You can also learn how to improve your own practices by observing how other teachers interact with their students.

## Set and Achieve Professional Goals

Setting professional goals not only provides direction and purpose as you focus on the larger issues involved in becoming an effective educator, but also will provide valuable baseline data so that you can chart a clear path for career success year after year. Goal-setting is often part of a teacher's annual evaluation cycle. If it is not, consider setting them for yourself. Goals tend to energize and motivate those who set them because they allow us to focus on what's important and thus to prioritize our efforts.

Experienced teachers also know that it's important to set SMART goals (goals that are specific, *measurable*, *attainable*, *relevant*, and *timely*) because they are easier to achieve than vague ones. Many teachers find that writing down their professional goals makes it easier to assess their achievements throughout the school year and to track the professional skills they know they want to improve.

Teacher Template (p442) offers a checklist of suggested competencies for first-year teachers to focus your goal setting and inspire your thinking and Teacher Template (p443) will guide you as you take ownership of your professional growth as a teacher.

## Other Strategies for a Successful First Year

In addition to taking ownership of your professional growth, there are several other strategies that can help you become a successful teacher in your first year: developing a reflective practice, learning from role models and mentors, seeking feedback on your performance, using the evaluation process to improve your performance, creating a professional portfolio, and finding a sustainable work-life balance.

### DEVELOP A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflecting on our teaching is a vital aspect of our professional lives. Such reflection will take place in many ways, so find the purposeful system that works for you.

There are different ways to reflect on your teaching practice. Reflection can be as simple as a comment inserted on a doc or slides, a sticky note on a lesson plan, or a voice recording on your phone. Examining the information that you gather in these ways will allow you to discern trends and patterns in your teaching as you seek to improve your skills.

One very common and useful method of maintaining a reflective teaching practice can also involve recording ideas and observations in a journal on a regular basis. Whether you choose to maintain a digital, paper, or audio journal, it is important to reflect regularly. Selecting a couple of the prompts that follow may help you get the most out of the time you dedicate to reflecting on your teaching practice:

- What students do I need to check in with? Why?
- What worked well in the lesson?
- Where did I feel comfortable and at ease and where could I have prepared differently?
- What would I do differently next time?
- Were my goals for the lesson reasonable and appropriate?
- To what extent were my students engaged and challenged to do their best?
- How do I know my students are learning? Do they know what they are learning and why?
- What opportunities for reteaching or extending learning do I need to provide?
- At what points in a lesson did I monitor and adjust strategies? Why? How productive was this flexibility?
- What data do I need to collect before moving on to the next unit of study? How can I gather this information?
- Where do students need more support or scaffolding to understand concepts?
- Where can students have more choice and ownership of their learning?
- How can I elevate the quality of student collaboration and conversation in small groups?
- How can I leverage learning technology to meet students' needs and inspire them?

- What challenges did I face today? How well did I address them?
- How well do I listen to my students? What can I do to make sure that I model good listening skills?
- How did I show that I was enthusiastic about the subject matter?
- How effective were the motivational techniques I used? How can I modify them for future lessons?
- How can I foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and community among my students?
- How did I provide opportunities for students to think, act, and engage like the practitioners who use this subject in the world beyond school?
- To what extent did I encourage and support students?

“To this day, every time I teach something, I write on sticky notes with ideas on how to improve the lesson for next year. I am currently in the second week of the school year, and half of my desk is covered with sticky notes. I still have some on my desk left over from the end of last year. I will keep those notes adhered to my desk until I get the chance to revise those end-of-year lessons.”

*Vivian Jewell, 25 years' experience*

Teacher Template 1.1 offers a template for professional self-reflection.



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## TEACHER TEMPLATE 1.1

# A Template for Professional Self-Reflection

Creating a template that works for you will make reflecting on your practices a manageable daily routine.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Celebrate successes: What went well today? How was it achieved?

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Acknowledge challenges: What didn't go well? What contributed to that outcome?

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Consider solutions: What can I do to better address those challenges? Who can support me in this?

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Self Check-in: How am I doing? What self-care strategies were most helpful this week?

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## LEARN FROM ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS

One of the most important ways to become an effective teacher is to find good role models and mentors. No matter how long you teach, you will be able to learn from colleagues who are generous with their time, energy, and knowledge.

New teachers often find themselves reluctant to ask for help for various reasons, such as embarrassment at not knowing information or feeling intimidated by the expertise of their colleagues. If you find yourself hesitating to ask for help, keep in mind that teachers in general tend to be friendly and supportive people who remember what it's like to be a new teacher. Most of them will be glad to support you.

Reach out. You are not expected to know everything about teaching during your first year. It is far better to ask for help than to be stressed because you are not sure what to do.

### Tips for Finding Appropriate Role Models

Even though you will probably be assigned an official mentor, you can learn a great deal from other colleagues as well. If you look around your school, you'll find an organized teacher or two who can serve as role models when it comes to productivity. You will find someone who is skillful at communicating with upset family members or who engages students through innovative strategies. Beyond your school, there are educators throughout the district and in virtual communities. Soon you will see that role models for just about every aspect of your school life are all around you if you seek them out.

### Tips for Working Well with an Official Mentor

Most school districts will assign official mentors to help new teachers during their first year, sometimes for the first three years. It's not always easy to begin a dialogue with a near stranger about your concerns at the start of a school year, but it is important to build rapport and not to hesitate to ask for help. Your mentor is invested in your success and was also a new teacher once so they have some understanding of what it's like to be in your place.

What should you ask of a mentor? Although novice teachers will have a wide range of needs, there are some common concerns that all teachers share. These usually can be divided into two levels of questions that you will discuss with your mentor. The first is the practical level: the daily concerns that are difficult to manage at first. The following are just a few of the day-to-day concerns that you can discuss with your mentor:

- How to get to know students
- How to handle planning and curriculum concerns
- How to use school technology
- How to obtain materials, equipment, and supplies
- How to communicate with families and caregivers
- How to manage paperwork
- How to arrange schedules and other school routines

The second level of questions that you should ask a mentor focuses on issues that are more complex. After you have settled into the school term and mastered the general information you need, you will be able to expand your focus to the art of teaching. Some of the complex issues your mentor can discuss with you can include topics such as these:

- How to solve common classroom problems
- How to support students with learning differences
- How to increase student motivation
- How to design differentiated instruction
- How to create an inclusive and positive learning environment
- How to assess students and help students self-assess
- How to engage students with a variety of teaching strategies

## SEEK FEEDBACK ON YOUR PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

Feedback is a gift and healthy systems have healthy feedback loops. One of the most useful ways to grow professionally is to proactively seek feedback from a variety of sources. Still, it can be uncomfortable and require vulnerability to give and receive feedback. You can do this formally and informally in many ways, such as observing and talking with students, surveying students and families, analyzing data, or asking colleagues, mentors, or administrators to observe and provide coaching. No matter how you choose to seek feedback about your professional performance, it is a wise idea to use a variety of instruments to gather as much information as possible about your skills.

Feedback is most useful when provided in the spirit of a coach. A coach is invested in your success and holds a higher vision for your performance. A critic does not. A coach will reflect on strengths and weaknesses and share ideas for improving. When gathering feedback from others, it may be helpful to mention the distinction between coaching and criticism. The cadence for informal feedback is daily and weekly. Timing for formal feedback from stakeholders is up to you, but recommended at least twice a year. To make sure that you have an accurate view of your strengths and the areas in which you could improve, try these methods of obtaining feedback:

- Ask your students, families, caregivers, colleagues, and administrators for feedback using Google Forms or the free surveys at SurveyMonkey ([surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com)).
- Video yourself teaching and reflect on what you see.
- Ask a colleague, mentor, or administrator to observe you for part of a lesson.
- Use exit tickets or digital tools to poll students at the end of class to ask your students to comment on the day's lesson.

## Make the Most of Peer Observations

Just as it is helpful for you to observe other teachers as they work with their students, it is also beneficial for you to ask colleagues to observe you as you teach. This can happen synchronously or asynchronously by sharing a pre-recorded video. One of the advantages of this type of informal observation is that the observer does not need to stay in your room long to observe. A quick snapshot observation of you at work is often enough time for a colleague to be able to discuss what happened in class.

It may also be beneficial for a colleague to take a more detailed and systematic approach to the observation. One way to ensure optimal benefit to this approach to peer observation is to use an organizer like the one in Teacher Template 1.2.



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## TEACHER TEMPLATE 1.2

### Make the Most of Peer Observations

Design a template to make peer observations as beneficial as possible.

*Your feedback is a gift. Thank you for taking the time to coach me in my areas of strength and in my areas for growth.*

Observed Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Observer: \_\_\_\_\_

The Lesson: What lesson is planned?

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Special Requests: Are there specific areas of focus for the observer?

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Concerns: Anything you want to share with the observer in advance?

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Observer's response to the areas of concern noted above:

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Celebrations: Observer's feedback on what went well

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Engagement: Observer's feedback on the quality of student engagement

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Questions for Reflection: Observer's questions for the observed teacher

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Coaching: Suggestions for the observed teacher to consider

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## USE THE EVALUATION PROCESS TO IMPROVE YOUR TEACHING SKILLS

Formal evaluations are another form of feedback and part of continuous improvement. They can be of enormous benefit to you, or they can turn you into a nervous wreck. Developing a strong working relationship with your principal/supervisor, inviting them to walkthrough often, and embodying a growth mindset make all the difference. If you want to grow as a teacher, then adopt the attitude that your evaluators will reflect your strengths and offer advice in areas in which you need to improve.

As a teacher, you can expect to be evaluated on a variety of criteria often during your career. The evaluation process has several components.

First, you may complete a self-assessment and set goals for the year. You may be expected to collect data and other evidence throughout the year to track how well you have met your goals. There are often two or more formal observations during the year. If you do not already have a copy of your district's evaluation process and necessary forms, you should obtain these items. You can expect one of your supervisors to discuss your goals and lesson plan with you in a pre-observation conference. This is a good time to mention any problems you are having and to solicit advice.

Sometime after your pre-observation conference, your evaluator will make a planned classroom observation. They may use a document like the preceding Template 1.2. At this point, the evaluator will be observing your practice and student engagement. On occasion, scheduled observations will be rescheduled as administrators often have crises that disrupt their plans. After the observation, you will meet with your evaluator again. At this post-observation conference, the evaluator will reflect with you about the lesson you taught and highlight your strengths and areas for growth.

You can also expect other observations during the year. The number varies from school district to school district. Expect to have many informal visits from administrators over the course of your career but especially during your first few years as a probationary teacher.

Near the end of the school year, you will have a final evaluation conference. This conference will involve more than just a discussion of the formal classroom observations you have had throughout the year; it will address your overall effectiveness as an educator. If you have established a strong working relationship with your supervisor, there should be no surprises in your final evaluation. You and your supervisor should have a shared understanding of your strengths and areas for growth. This shared knowledge will then inform the professional development plan you develop.

### How to Prepare for an Observation

In many ways, informal visits by evaluators are much easier than the planned, formal observations. You do not have time to worry about an unannounced visit, whereas knowing that an administrator is going to observe you in a few days may give you time to feel

anxious. In addition, taking the following steps can help you feel confident both before and during the observation:

**Step One:** Be proactive. Develop a positive rapport with your principal or supervisor and invite them to stop by your classroom often. Make sure that you have a copy of the observation form. In fact, you should do this as early in the term as you can. Study the form so that you know what the observer will be looking for as you teach.

**Step Two:** Set the date for the observation when the observer will see student engagement, not a test or silent reading, for example. Observations should not disrupt the flow of learning in your class. Depending on the goals of the observation and the needs of your students, you will design a lesson plan that is simple or more complex.

**Step Three:** Tell your students what is going to happen. You have a routine for visitors established already. Let them know the name of the visitor and that the purpose of the visit is to observe teaching and learning in this classroom community. Let them know the visitor will be providing coaching to you to help you be a better teacher.

**Step Four:** Create your lesson plan and collect extra digital or printable copies of all materials needed for the lesson for the observer. Select an unobtrusive place for your visitor, and put these materials there.

**Step Five:** Breathe deeply. You got this. Expect to be nervous, but also expect to do well because you have prepared thoroughly and have a growth mindset.

### Turn Constructive Feedback into a Positive Experience

One of the most difficult aspects of feedback is hearing constructive feedback and coaching in your areas of growth. Experienced teachers will tell you that although it is not easy to have a supervisor discuss the problems with your performance, such constructive feedback can be conducive to professional growth. With a professional attitude and a growth mindset, you will find that discussing your teaching performance during the evaluation conference can be a valuable way to improve your teaching skills. Here are some suggestions to make an evaluation conference a positive and productive experience:

- Remember that you and your supervisor share a goal to educate youth and grow you as an educator. You are collaborators in this endeavor.
- Go into your evaluation conference with a device or paper and pen, and an open mind. Be prepared to hear positive as well as constructive feedback about your performance.
- Listen objectively. If you find yourself becoming defensive, stop, take a breath, and remember we are educators. We are all learning and growing.
- Ask for advice and suggestions for improvement, then listen carefully, take notes, and reflect on them.
- Share your reflections and additional context as needed.
- After the conference, continue to invite the administrator to stop by and update them on your progress since the formal evaluation.

## The Impact of Value-Added Assessments on the Evaluation Process

The term *value-added assessment* refers to the way that evaluators assess the performance of a specific teacher by comparing current standardized test scores with past test scores for that teacher's students. The intended result of these comparisons is to determine the contributions to student growth made by each teacher in a single year.

Although the intent of value-added assessment is to provide a reasonable and objective method of assessing teacher effectiveness, the practice is highly controversial. Some of the problems with the use of value-added assessments can include limiting the scope of an education to a discrete set of knowledge and skills, narrowing the curriculum by teaching to the test, and the need for multiple measures to evaluate teacher performance. Value-added assessments can be skewed by many factors.

As controversial as this method of assessment may be, some school districts use value-added assessments as a part of a teacher's evaluation process. The implications of this are significant for all teachers. There are several actions that you can take if your district engages in value-added assessment:

- Study the assessment for your grade level. Understand the knowledge, skill, and format of the assessment. Take the practice assessments yourself.
- Student growth on multiple measures is your goal already. Look at your students both as individuals and as part of the whole class.
- Assess your students' strengths and weaknesses in terms of their knowledge and skill level at the beginning of each unit of study. Use that early assessment as a guide when you differentiate instruction for the unit.
- Make sure to measure and record each student's mastery of the subject matter. This will allow you to correct gaps in knowledge or skills as necessary.
- Provide differentiated support for students with diverse learning needs in your class. Collaborate with specialists who also serve your emergent bilingual students, students who experience disabilities, poverty, or homelessness. This will enable you to intervene early to set them up for success.
- Teach the academic vocabulary and test-taking skills that are appropriate for your students. Offer practice sessions so that your students will not be intimidated by unfamiliar test procedures.
- Don't hesitate to ask early in the school term for assistance for students who may be struggling. Involve support personnel as well as adult, peer, virtual or generative AI tutors to help those students.
- Don't allow the standardized testing or value-added evaluation systems to diminish the rich community and world of ideas that creates joy for you and your students.

## What to Do If Your Evaluation Is Poor

Almost every thoughtful evaluator will offer constructive feedback on how you can improve your teaching performance, but there is a difference between those recommendations and an evaluation that indicates that your classroom performance is not acceptable according to your school district's standards.

If you receive a poor evaluation, it is very likely that your first reactions will be anger, frustration, shock, and despair. Although such emotions are understandable, the best course of action for you to take is to process these feelings quickly so that you can respond in a professional manner. Next, you should strive to be as objective and proactive as possible in dealing with the situation. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I understand my evaluator's concerns? Am I clear about what I am expected to do to address those concerns and the timeline for improvement?
- Whom can I turn to for support? Mentors? Colleagues?
- What immediate changes can I make to improve my teaching performance?
- How can I contact my local education association representative for guidance?
- How can I learn more about my district's evaluation, non-renewal, and termination policies?
- What long-term plans should I make to ensure that I have remediated the areas of poor performance indicated?

You should also keep in mind that your poor performance evaluation is confidential and not a topic that should be public knowledge at school, or even worse, among your students or their families. Do not vent indiscriminately or discuss your evaluation with anyone other than trusted family, colleagues, and friends. Keep in mind that you want to solve this problem, not spread the news. Even though your evaluation may be a poor one, employees are still expected to sign the evaluation. If you want to write a letter to rebut or explain any part of the evaluation, you should feel free to do so and to ask that it be added to your personnel file, along with the evaluation itself.

Finally, you should learn about your legal rights as an employee of your school district. Contact your local education association representative (if you have one) as well as your district's human relations office to learn as much as you can about how to manage your situation most effectively.

## CREATE A PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO

Creating a professional portfolio serves two purposes: Career Growth and Reflection. Teachers are in high demand and teachers have opportunities across the country and internationally. A portfolio goes beyond your résumé to showcase your abilities and achievements to prospective employers. Additionally, as a new teacher, you will find that another valuable result of the portfolio is the opportunity it gives you to reflect on your teaching experiences and philosophy. It does not take long to set up and maintain a professional

portfolio if you take the time to plan what you want to include in it. Although many teachers keep a paper portfolio, it is also easy to maintain a digital one or even a combination of both.

Whichever method you choose to use, the key to managing the portfolio process is simple: plan what you want to include and file that work as you encounter it. A lesson plan here, a survey there, photograph of you working with students, a copy of some of the snapshot observations you've done, and soon you will have a representative sampling of your work.

Most professional portfolios contain materials that can be grouped into two parts: evidence or artifacts from your career, and your reflections on various aspects of your teaching experiences. Here are some of the items you can include:

### Artifacts

- Formal observations and evaluations
- Peer observations
- Student responses to surveys about your class
- Representative lesson plans—usually a week's worth
- A description of your classroom management plan
- A video or audio recording of a lesson
- Photographs of you and your classroom setup
- Photographs of students working
- Lists of committees you've served on
- Lists of extracurricular work and activities
- Annotated samples of student work
- Letters of recommendation
- Notes from students and families or caregivers
- Awards or honors
- Evidence from professional development workshops or courses
- An explanation of your teaching responsibilities

“Schedule a gym class, hobby, or something else that starts one to two hours after the school day ends, at least two days a week. It will help you prioritize what needs to get done. Staying at school too long can lead to poor time management because you feel like you have forever to accomplish things. It can also lead to burnout.”

*Margaret R. Scheirer, 12 years' experience*

### Reflections

- Sample pages from a journal recording your reflections on your teaching practice
- Responses you've made when observing other teachers
- Annotated lesson plans

## MAINTAIN A WORK-LIFE BALANCE FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

It's important to have both a life and a career, and let's face it, work and life can both be unpredictable and often have competing priorities. Work-life balance is elusive; no one achieves balance at all times. It is deeply personal and doesn't look the same for everyone. It can change from season to season and year to year. You can, however, strive for a sustainable balance for your career and personal life so that both contribute to your sense of fulfillment in the long run.

Education is often ranked as one of the most stressful of all career choices. The chief cause of this ranking frequently lies in the unfortunate combination of too many pressing responsibilities and the incredible dedication that many teachers feel about their work. Emotionally, mentally, and physically challenging, teaching is a compelling profession where teachers find it all too easy to immerse themselves in their school duties to the detriment of their personal lives. The result is that many teachers report significant burnout due to a work-life imbalance.

Because being a teacher means that daily responsibilities begin early and seem never to end, it is not always easy to leave the demands of school at school. Because we are in the business of changing lives, we feel the weight of those responsibilities long after we have left the building. One of the occupational hazards all successful teachers face is that it is all too easy to take home not only our paperwork, but also our worries about our school days.

Successful teachers who want a long-term career in education must learn how to juggle the demands of being in a classroom all day long and still maintain a fulfilling personal life. The key? Finding a balance among three aspects of our lives: Self, Relationships, and Career. You will need to intentionally determine how you spend your time between the challenges of a new career and such personal needs as spending time with family members, maintaining friendships, and pursuing other endeavors that bring joy to life. To find a sustainable balance, consider putting some of these suggestions into practice:

- Make time for yourself. Sleep. Eat well. Exercise. Express gratitude. Plan enjoyable activities. Your students will not thrive if their teacher is exhausted and stressed. Fill your own bucket so you have energy to care for your students.
- Surround yourself with supportive and positive people who can help you. Being connected to others, including your PLN, is an important way to avoid the stress that can make every day miserable. Supportive colleagues can help you figure out the solutions you need.
- Don't lose sight of the big picture. No one can make every school day a success. What you can do, however, is realize that each school year is a marathon, not a sprint. It takes patience, determination, endurance, resilience, and a clear idea of the desired outcome for runners to complete a marathon; the same is true for teachers.
- Delegate responsibilities. Decide who can help you do a task, clearly explain how you want it accomplished, and then step back and allow that person to get busy. Depending on the task, this may be a grade-level colleague, a paraprofessional, a volunteer, a family member, or a student.

- See the opportunities in your problems. When you have a problem at school, try to think of it as an opportunity to learn and grow.
- Add structure to your life. Routines will prevent many stress-inducing problems. Putting your keys in the same place every day and prepping meals for the week, for example, will save you frustration later.
- Work efficiently while you are at school. Prioritize the tasks that you must accomplish and work steadily at them. Use your planning time and any spare moment to their fullest advantage. The more you accomplish at school, the less you will have to do at home, leaving you with the time you want to enjoy life away from school.
- Focus on the tasks at hand. Too often teachers find it easy to second-guess their decisions or to replay troublesome scenarios from the day. Instead of endlessly rehashing what went wrong, focus on productive tasks, such as designing the plans you need to create or new activities to spark your students' interest.
- Set boundaries. No one expects you to be on call twenty-four hours a day. Set your start and end times for school communication. Although there will be many after-school demands on your time, learn to gently decline those that are not a good use of your time.
- Keep your career worries in perspective. When something goes wrong, ask yourself if you will still be affected by it in a year, in a few months, or even in a week. Try to focus on the big picture instead of allowing nagging small issues to rob you of your peace of mind.
- Always have something to look forward to. Make a point of scheduling rest, planning a weekend excursion or an outing with family and friends or even setting aside time for a hobby. Looking forward to something pleasant in the future will help you maintain your equanimity in the present.
- Don't forget that your new profession is only one part of a rewarding and busy life. If you find that you are spending too much time at school or worrying about school after you have left for the day, then it's time to take steps to manage that school-induced stress.
- Stop trying to control everything. Choose your battles wisely by asking yourself if the issue that is troubling you is worth your time and energy.
- Allow yourself time to make effective transitions within your day. One way to manage this is by taking a deep breath between classes or activities. Another is having an opening routine that your students can do independently. This will free you to make the mental, emotional, and physical switch from one group of students or from one content area to another.
- Keep a flexible attitude. Get into the habit of looking for solutions instead of dwelling on your problems. If you are open to alternatives, you will be able to assess your options much more quickly.
- Stop rushing from one responsibility to the next. Slow down. Here are some ways to slow your school life down: take the time to eat lunch, allow yourself ten minutes to relax with colleagues at some point during your day, and use a journal for reflection.

- Reflect on the positive things that happen at school. When it comes time for that important self-reflection, be sure to think about the positive things that happen each day. Focusing on your strengths and your successes is just as important as improving your areas for growth.
- If you plan your responses to difficult situations, you will definitely prevent many problems. Think first and maybe consult a colleague before you respond. For example, have an experienced teacher read over your draft email to the upset parent.
- Take advantage of the assistance your district may offer its employees. Many districts offer various types of mental health assistance to their employees. Often referred to as an EAP (Employee Assistance Program), this district-wide assistance can take many forms, such as counseling referrals, wellness activities, online stress reduction classes, support groups, financial coaching, help with substance abuse, and many others.

## Self-Care to Teach at Your Best

Caring for yourself is not selfish. Prioritizing what you need to reduce stress, reduce the risk of illness, and build resilience allows you to bring your best self to the challenging work of educating youth. Developing habits and routines for self-care in the same way you develop habits and routines in the classroom will fill your bucket so that you have energy to focus on the needs of others. Your students, colleagues, friends, and family will also benefit from and appreciate this investment you make in yourself as self-care practices will help you to be a more happy, healthy, and engaged person.

In addition to the personal benefits of self-care, research findings indicate that teacher burnout is correlated to real consequences for student learning. When teachers experience emotional exhaustion and overwhelm, students have less motivation and lower academic achievement. Implementing self-care practices early in your career is likely to help you remain in the profession longer with greater job satisfaction. We also know that when we are exhausted, we are less resilient, more irritable, and more likely to have negative interactions with students. The habits of self-care you develop will allow you to find sustainability in a profession that will take as much time as you allow it.

While the focus of this section is on the vital importance of individual self-care strategies, it's important to note that systemic changes are also needed to create sustainability in

“The most significant element in a learning environment is the well-being of the teacher. Students thrive best when their teacher is thriving.”

*Jay Schroder, author of Teach from Your Best Self: A Teacher's Guide to Thriving in the Classroom.*  
[teachfromyourbestself.org](http://teachfromyourbestself.org)

the profession and reduce burnout for teachers. Such organizational changes may include working with administrators on how to structure time in the school day and reducing the number of responsibilities and tasks required of teachers. In your first year, you may discuss the ways that the school could better support teachers, but it's more likely that you will have the time and energy to focus on that which you can control, your personal self-care.

Who knows, the commitments you make to yourself may even start to shift your school culture as you model healthy habits for your students, colleagues, and administrators. Some school and district administrators intentionally and purposefully care for the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of teachers and create a culture where self-care is the norm. Regardless of your school culture, committing to self-care is important so that you have the clarity, the joy, and the resilience that will sustain you as a teacher across a long career.

Accomplishing this takes practice and discipline. Three realities of the first year of teaching that can become barriers to self-care include:

**Demands on Time:** During the school year, teachers start early and end late, offering extra help after school, sponsoring extracurricular activities and athletics, or working additional jobs. Some teachers have caregiving responsibilities for children or parents who need attention outside of the school day. Sometimes a teacher's interruptions get interrupted with a steady stream of others' needs. Time is a teacher's most rare and valuable resource.

**Inexperience:** This is your first year teaching. Everything is new and every decision takes longer at the start of your career. So, it is common for first-year teachers to work many hours as you gain proficiency with all your many responsibilities.

**Unspoken Expectations:** Children are cherished. Teaching helps to determine each child's future so there are many unspoken expectations about this vitally important role. Teachers want to do everything they can to meet the needs of students; prioritizing students' needs is absolutely part of the job. This leads to an expectation that sacrifice is also required to be a teacher and guilt can ensue if teachers prioritize their own needs.

These are real obstacles strewn along the path to self-care, but there are several strategies you can use to overcome these barriers, meet the needs of students, and care for your own health and happiness. Teachers are incredible planners so plan for your self-care just as you plan for your students. Each person is unique and has preferences for how you think about and organize your time. Choose the strategies that work for you and are effective in achieving the goal: your health and well-being. Here are a few strategies that may work for you:

### **Set and Maintain Boundaries on Your Time**

There are several ways to set and maintain time boundaries for your personal and professional commitments. You will need to find one that works for you to identify your priorities and provide adequate time for activities to avoid overcommitting. Some teachers prefer to reflect on their personal and professional priorities and think about their day in chunks of time. Some teachers write down their priorities as time blocks on a calendar so that they see it visually. Often, that which gets on the calendar has a good chance of getting done in the highly scheduled lives of teachers. Whatever strategy you use, communicate your time boundaries to others so they can respect your time and you can respect theirs.

Whether you choose to put it on your calendar or hold it in your mind, consider allocating time for your morning routine, your arrival at school, lunch, a ten-minute break midday or when students have left for the day. Determine each day what time you will leave school. During the evening and weekends, block out time for your preferred activities, those experiences that nurture your well-being. That may be time with family or friends, hobbies, or rest periods. Create intentional, reasonable limits on the time you will work on evenings and weekends.

Give yourself permission to disconnect from emails, social media, Slack, or app messages. Set an out-of-office reply on evenings and weekends to let students, families, caregivers, and colleagues know that their message is important to you, and you will respond on the next school day.

### **Collaborate with Colleagues**

Developing structures around collaborating with teachers in your school and your wider PLN and (as the technology advances) your generative AI assistants can reduce your workload. Share the responsibilities of planning, grading, and problem-solving so that you gain the benefit of their wisdom and expertise, save time, and don't feel isolated making all the decisions. (See Section Three for more strategies on effectively collaborating with colleagues and Section Two on the use of generative AI assistants.)

### **Practice Saying No**

Be clear on your priorities and careful about the commitments you make. Get comfortable saying no, politely. You will need to protect your boundaries so that your teaching priorities and your self-care commitments get accomplished. No one will rescue you from over-committing. This is something you must do for yourself.

### **Say Yes to Rest**

Protecting your peace and letting yourself rest is not a waste of time. It allows you to be at your best when you are at school. Establish your bedtime and waking time. Block out time on evenings, weekends, and school breaks to disconnect, rest, and recharge in whatever way makes sense for you.

## **Find What Works for You**

Each teacher is unique, and self-care can look different for everyone, so find what works for you. What brings you joy? What will give you a sense of satisfaction and meaningful relief from your stress? Protect time for those things and infuse them into your school day. Once you commit to prioritizing your self-care, it can take two months for a habit to form, so build your self-care habits by making consistent, daily choices. These habits may relate to your mental/emotional, physical, or social needs, so find the habits that work best for you and put one or two on the calendar to get started. Pick a couple of ideas that resonate with you. This is not a to-do list, but rather a few of the possibilities in each category:

## Mental/Emotional Self-Care

- **Me Time in the Morning**

Preserve five to fifteen minutes for yourself to just be, drink coffee or tea, read a book, listen to music, play an instrument, breathe, stretch, take a bath, knit, draw, write your morning pages, whatever is peaceful for you.
- **Breaks during the Day**

Schedule breaks during the workday. Create space from two to ten minutes throughout the day for breathing, mindfulness, and quiet. This may be in the car, in your classroom, on the way back from dropping off elementary students at P.E., during lunch, or on a quick walk to change your state of mind. It may occur alone, with a colleague, or with your students.
- **Gratitude Journal**

Create a written or spoken gratitude journal and record three things you are grateful for each day.
- **Set a Closing Time for Devices**

Establish a limit for social media and use of devices so that you are not scrolling up to the moment you put your head on the pillow.
- **Take Two Minutes**

In the car, in your classroom, during your bus or train commute, set a two-minute timer and do nothing but breathe in and out.
- **Dance It Out**

Have a one- to two-minute dance party with your favorite music in your personal space or in the classroom. Your students might enjoy this, too.
- **Connect with Nature/Greenspace**

Spend some time in the greenspace near you and notice the sounds, the sun, wind, flora, and fauna, along with the changing seasons.

## Physical Self-Care

- **Meal Prep**

Plan your meals and snacks each week. If you bring your lunch and snacks to school, consider preparing five lunches on the weekend so something delicious is easy to grab and go in the morning.
- **Hydration**

Invest in the water bottle that works best for you. Keep it full and near you throughout the day so that it's easier to remain hydrated.
- **Use the Restroom**

Some schools don't provide adequate time to take care of basic biological needs. So, you may need to develop a tag in/tag out text network to message available colleagues who can supervise your students when you need to use the restroom.

- Move Your Body

Find your favorite form of movement such as walking, dance, running, tennis, or yoga, and set a goal of moving your body for twenty minutes, five days a week. Add it to your calendar and invite a friend or family member to join you if you wish.

- Walking Meetings

If you have regular meetings with one or two other people and you don't need a computer for the conversation, take your meeting for a walk around the block or on the school track.

- Sleep Hygiene

Create a nighttime routine that helps you get adequate sleep to have energy for the day ahead. Your body will appreciate going to bed and waking up on a predictable schedule.

- Power Naps

If you are always tired, set an alarm and take a fifteen-minute power nap after school to reenergize you for your evening activities.

- Pajama Day

They are not just for spirit days at school. Declare a weekend pajama day or a pajama morning on occasion so that you (and anyone in your home who wants to participate) remain in your PJs engaging in home-based activities that are restorative and restful for you.

- Spa Services

While this requires additional resources, and cannot occur daily, for some people, self-care is synonymous with massages, pedicures, and spa services. Book your appointments at intervals that make sense for you. Consider getting a foam roller or neck massage device for home use so that you can have a daily spa moment.

## Social Self-Care

- Connect with Family and Friends

Call, text, and spend time with friends and family who affirm you, support you, and bring you joy. Make sure your primary relationships continue to be nurtured even with the demands of your job.

- Connect with Colleagues

Find a mentor and colleagues in your PLN whom you trust and with whom you can be vulnerable. Discuss challenges and ask them to help you brainstorm new approaches. This reduces feelings of isolation and allows you to benefit from their wisdom and expertise.

## Self-Care Hobbies

- Connect with Hobbies

Your outside interests before you started teaching are still important. Connect with whatever restores and revitalizes you.

- Connect with Creativity

Some hobbies may include creative pursuits that energize and delight you. Whether you prefer to create solo or with other people, don't abandon your creative hobbies such as art, reading, music, writing, journaling, poetry, quilting, cooking, photography, and more.

## Include Self-Care Activities in Lesson Plans

Self-care is not just something you do alone, outside of the school day. Consider what a gift you would give yourself and your students if you purposefully included self-care life skills and strategies in your lesson plans. Self-care and self-regulation life skills align with health standards, social-emotional learning (SEL), and the Whole Child approach. Could you infuse lessons with self-regulation and self-care activities like gratitude journals, mindful breathing, physical movement, hydration, or moments in nature? Students would benefit tremendously from learning these strategies early in their lives. (See Section Seven for more details on SEL, mindfulness, and the Whole Child approach.)

A career in education is a marathon, not a sprint, requiring deep wells of resilience and energy. Teachers cannot engage in this complex and important work if they are ill, overwhelmed, and perpetually stressed. Committing to your own self-care is one way to invest in your health, your students, your relationships, and your ability to continue teaching for many years.

## Twenty-Five Strategies Specifically Geared for an Educator's Tough Times at School

Having a bad day at school? Try the following strategies to shake it off and reduce the stress that comes with a bad day at school:

1. Go to your school's library media center and escape into a good book or read a newspaper for a few minutes.
2. Talk things over with a trusted colleague or mentor.
3. Take a brisk walk around the track or the perimeter of your building.
4. Refuse to take it personally when students are rude or disruptive.
5. If you have too much to do, divide each task into manageable amounts and get busy.
6. There are several free apps for mindfulness or meditation. If you would like to try one, a good place to start is with Calm ([calm.com](http://calm.com)) or Headspace ([headspace.com](http://headspace.com)).

7. Take a break. Change activities. Do something you enjoy instead of dealing with drudgery.
8. Close your classroom door. Set a timer for five minutes. Allow yourself to just rest and be quiet.
9. Grab a sheet of paper and a pencil. Brainstorm solutions to the cause of your stress.
10. Listen to relaxing (or energizing) music for a few minutes.
11. Eat a healthful snack. Junk food will cheer you up, but only for a few minutes.
12. Even though using mindfulness activities in class for students is now a widespread practice, there are plenty of benefits for teachers as well. A useful site for teachers is Mindful Teachers ([mindfulteachers.org](http://mindfulteachers.org)).
13. Acknowledge when you are genuinely upset. Denial doesn't solve problems.
14. Plan a fun activity that you can anticipate with pleasure.
15. Ask your students for their advice if the problem is one where they can help.
16. Clear up some clutter. Tidy your desk or your classroom.
17. Shift your activity. Move to another location, if possible.
18. Ask for help. Doing this can allow you to move closer to a positive resolution to a problem.
19. Post a funny cartoon, meme, or photo where you can see it when you need a laugh during the school day.
20. Tackle busywork: grade quiz papers, answer e-mail, anything to be productive instead of paralyzed in negative emotions.
21. Deal systematically with the problems that cause stress. Don't procrastinate. Cope.
22. When you find yourself dwelling on negative things that can happen at school, make a conscious effort to reframe those thoughts in a positive manner. For example, instead of thinking, "My students are always out of control after lunch," try "What can I do to give my students ways to channel their energy after lunch?"
23. Remind yourself once again that today's problems likely won't be important a year—or maybe even a week—from now.
24. Choose your battles. Is what you are stressed about worth your time and energy?
25. Take a deep breath. Hold to the count of three. Exhale slowly. Repeat until you feel calmer.

## Questions to Discuss with Colleagues

Sharing ideas with colleagues is a helpful way to devise solutions to some of the problems that you must manage successfully at school. Here you will find several topics to open discussions with colleagues about successful instructional practices:

1. You have had a stressful day at school in which nothing seemed to go as you had planned. What can you do to remain confident while learning from the events of this tough day?

2. You just received an email from your principal telling you that they will visit your classroom later in the day. Your lesson is not a very exciting one, nor is it particularly well structured. What should you do? Who can offer advice?
3. You feel overwhelmed and have not been able to prioritize self-care. How can you find the time for self-care?
4. Although you are sure that you want to create a supportive network of colleagues to share ideas with, you are not sure about how to begin. How can you and your colleagues expand on and learn from your professional learning network?
5. What problems can you anticipate having as a first-year teacher? Where can you find help for them?

## Topics to Discuss with a Mentor

Although the topics that new teachers need to discuss with a mentor vary from teacher to teacher and from school to school, there are some that most first-year teachers should be comfortable discussing with a mentor or a trusted colleague. You should ask your mentor about these topics from this section:

- How to learn about professional development opportunities in your school district
- Tips for making sure your evaluation process goes well
- How to set appropriate goals for your first year
- Which teachers at your school would be interested in visiting each other's classes
- How to manage school-induced stress and find a sustainable work-life balance

## Reflection Questions to Guide Your Thinking

1. What are your personal strengths as a teacher at this point in your career? How can you use these strengths to overcome some of the problems that you will face this year?
2. What, if anything, makes you nervous about the evaluation process? How can you make sure that you know what to expect and how to prepare for it?
3. What are reasonable expectations around a professional development plan in your first year so that you can focus on your classroom responsibilities?
4. What part of your school life has been stressful so far? How have you managed this stress? Are you comfortable with your work-life balance so far? If not, how can you improve it?
5. What can you do to stay connected to your “why” and maintain your fresh idealism as you go through the ups and downs of your first year as a teacher?

