
Section 1: Listen up!

1:1 Introduction by Kathy Megyeri

An Open Letter to New Teachers

Dear New Teacher:

You are beginning a new school year and a new career with high expectations and the excitement and joy that fill school halls each September. As a recent retiree, I offer you these words of advice that I wish someone had given me 35 years ago—words that will, hopefully, make your school year and the rest of your career a special and memorable one.

- Take time for yourself and your family. In spite of the demands on you and your enthusiasm to do everything possible to make this year successful, remember that you have a personal life, too. Take time to exercise, eat right, spend an occasional night at the theatre, hug your own husband and children, and get enough rest. Only then can you give enough of yourself to your job, which will sap your strength and burn you out, if you let it.
- Develop a thick skin. In spite of your best efforts, you will encounter criticism, hurtful comments and an occasional false statement about something you said or the “improper” way you handled a classroom situation. Some students may even demand to be transferred from your class. Don’t take it personally. You cannot be everything to everyone.
- You cannot escape being a teacher, no matter how hard you try, so live with the mannerisms you unwillingly develop. You will resent people talking when you do, you will demand people’s undivided attention, you will waggle your index finger occasionally, you will talk in “lists,” you will think of “objectives” before each presentation, you will “think school” most of the time, you will become a pack rat and take every “freebie” for possible use in class, and you will wake up in the middle

of the night wondering if you've prepared enough for the next day's lessons. These are occupational hazards.

- Never try to become your students' friend. Remember that you are their teacher, and certain behaviors are expected of you. You will find it amazing that the day after they leave your class, some of your students may not even recognize you on the street or in the school's halls. In most cases, their lives revolve around their friends, their parents, and them. You are not part of the equation.
- Don't expect "thank you's" or tokens of appreciation for all the extras that you do. If you receive any, it's a plus. You will spend untold hours writing college recommendations, putting up attractive bulletin boards, chaperoning field trips, attending school functions for which you are not paid, writing paragraphs of comments on students' papers that when returned are wadded up and thrown away, complimenting even the most obnoxious student on his unique qualities, and speaking to parents on answering machines or writing e-mails that are erased or intercepted by students. But it's considered part of the job and even expected without recognition or thanks. If by some miracle you are thanked or recognized in some small way, the reaction from your colleagues may well be, "How did she ever get that?" So, do as much as you can during school hours and then let it go.
- Don't expect support from parents, administrators or department chairmen. They have more than they can handle, so you are out there on your own. Therefore, watch what you say to students and how you behave. Keep a stiff upper lip, a "can-do" attitude and think positive. Don't let the fear of poor test scores rule your life. Remember, you know your subject, and now, your greatest task is to teach the material the best you know how in the most palatable way to students.
- Unfortunately, to a great extent, you will be judged by outward appearances, so look like a teacher and dress professionally. Keep the room neat and the bulletin boards current, as visitors want to be impressed. Showcase students' achievements, write a column for the PTSA newsletter, send accomplishments to local newspapers, volunteer to speak to groups such as the Rotary and Kiwanis, and write articles for professional publications—if you can find the time.

Section 1: Listen Up!

- Promote yourself and your students because taxpayers want to hear good news about what's going on in your classroom.
- In-fighting will occur in your department and between faculty members, no matter how much your school preaches that it is a "happy family" and in spite of the fact that teachers are paid basically the same for the same work, no matter the subject matter. Arguments will occur over who gets to teach the "gifted classes," who serves on which committee, who is assigned a student-teacher, who is chosen as a teacher-mentor for new teachers, and who gets released to attend out-of-county workshops.

Jealousy and competition are part of the work environment at most places, so don't waste time wondering who got which position for what reason or become part of the rumor mill. Stay focused on your classroom and on your teaching. The rest doesn't count because you can't do anything about it.

The average U.S. teacher spends almost \$500 a year of her own money on supplies, rewards and supplemental texts. Refrain as much as possible from spending your own money and instead, appeal to local groups to help you with special projects. Take one or two students and your principal to speak to local churches, Rotary luncheons, Lions and Kiwanis' club sessions and enlist parental support. Often, just a mention in the local paper about a special project will bring local businesses to your rescue and materials will magically appear.

Apply for any and all grants and awards. Many times, you are eligible to apply for a summer Fulbright, a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, a Newly Independent States Excellence in Teaching Award and money for additional classes in your subject field from groups such as the retired teachers' association.

Subscribe to professional publications and clip notices of opportunities. But remember that deadlines are early because notices of awards are usually sent out in March. Be alert and cognizant of what's out there and apply early.

First Lady Laura Bush has made the training and retention of teachers her cause, and in the next five years, this country will need almost 2 million new teachers, so

Section 1: Listen Up!

your teaching position will become elevated. More attention will be paid to you and more support will be forthcoming. But teaching is the hardest job you will ever have, and there will be days that you will be tempted to “throw in the towel.”

Let it be some comfort that those of us who stayed in the classroom our whole lives are ready to help. Most importantly, we empathize with the juggling act you will have to do, the smile you will constantly have to wear, the good nature you will have to show and the faith in humankind you will need to have.

Remember, we’re cheering for each and every one of you because some day, you will have to be there for another new teacher just beginning her career. Good Luck!

1:2 Earning Pearls of Wisdom by Melanie Peterson

You're teachers! You have it made. Done at 3:00pm everyday. Get the summers and holidays off. Everyone has heard these comments before. They are true – to a point. Not all teachers leave after the children do at the end of the school day. Many are there long after the final bell has rung. Yes, having major holidays off is a nice perk. However, only our fellow school staff and our families see the stack of work we bring home during those “vacations” or see us go into school during the Christmas break to catch up or get ahead. You bet it is grand to have the summers off. During that time we relax some, attend educational conferences and prepare for the next school year.

Let's be honest. Teaching can be a very difficult job. It is a real mixed bag. Each year is different and you never know what you're in for from year to year. In many ways it is like on-the-job training. There is a plethora of information to learn: the policies of the district and school, the curriculum of the grade or subject being taught, building routine, massive and ever-growing mountains of paperwork, including reports and report cards, evaluations and lesson plans. Then there are discipline techniques, classroom flow, organization and time management. It can be overwhelming.

There is so much to absorb and occasionally a lesson is learned along the way – the hard way. Paperwork has become a necessary and very heavy albatross around the necks of educators. I learned a very difficult lesson about paperwork early in my teaching career.

I was the second choice for a position in a center program for severely multiply-impaired students. I replaced the first choice candidate due to a glitch in an out-of-state teaching certificate. I happily accepted the job regardless of the fact that I was turned down for the position at first. Little did I know that not being offered the job initially was perhaps a blessing in disguise. I was fresh out of college and this position entailed the supervision of two classrooms, seven aides, and twenty-something severely multiply-impaired students. The clincher, though, was that one of the classrooms was “The Behavior Room.”

Section 1: Listen Up!

It was my desire to work with severely impaired children but I knew little of behavior management. I hired in around Thanksgiving that year, the school year was already in full swing, as it was a 230 day program. To say that I was overwhelmed was an understatement. The students were difficult and the staff felt threatened by a 23-year-old new teacher who knew nothing about these students, but was supposed to be in charge. Their actions and the classroom dynamics were my responsibility, however some of them had been employed there for over ten years and felt they knew more than a rookie teacher, yours truly. I was a hard-working and determined teacher though, thrilled to have my own classroom. I quickly learned the routine and got to know the staff and students.

Paperwork comprises a large part of a Special Education position. My day was no exception. It was IEP time (individualized educational plan) for several students when I arrived there. This consisted of filling out and mailing invitations to a meeting, to include the student's parents, therapists and other school staff, special ed. director, social worker, etc. In addition, evaluations had to be conducted and reports written and typed. This proved to be a lengthy process and one that included a deadline. This meeting regarding a student had to be conducted around the same time, as it had been the year previous.

When I arrived at the school I had gotten a crash course in filling out all that paperwork, the lesson probably falling short of what it should have been given my level of experience. When it came time for one of these meetings I came far too close to the deadline for the principal's liking even though I knew there was a possible fine if the meeting was not held in a timely manner.

Now, I don't profess to be a procrastinator and I'm a conscientious worker, however I was young and not terribly confident at that point in my life. I dropped the ball on this paperwork simply because I was nervous about asking for help. So, I let it all sit on a shelf, half complete, deadline approaching. The principal realized that the deadline was nearing and the invitations hadn't been mailed yet,

so she gave me a talking to and I finally asked for the help I needed to complete all of the necessary steps. I beat myself up over that for quite a while as I had high expectations for myself and it was out of character for me to let go of something such as that. I soon got that IEP paperwork routine down pat and I never let that happen again. From that experience I learned a valuable lesson.

Pearl of Wisdom #1

Although the paperwork can be a daunting task, second to the safety of your students, the next responsibility is to the paperwork. Muster up your courage and ask questions, repeatedly, if necessary, and stay on top of your paperwork. In doing so, you will save yourself stress and embarrassment.

Same classroom, same staff, different year.

As time marched on not only did I learn the ways of the classroom and conquer the paperwork mountain, but I also learned that the principal could be a bit of a bully. It seemed that at all times someone in the building was her scapegoat. That year it was me. The paperwork issue was the first of a handful of scoldings by her. One of my staff was also becoming a member of her “hen pecked club” but this time I was able to save her.

This incident involved a student in the behavior room (I’ll call him Marvin) who had started developing a habit of slipping out the back classroom door, which led to the parking lot. The school is situated in the middle of a subdivision. Oh Marvin knew just when to slip out silently and unnoticed. Luckily though, we were on the ball and would retrieve him quickly. One particular time, however, he had successfully slipped out and was discovered in the parking lot. Obviously, this was unacceptable. Lucky for me, I guess, I was at lunch when this happened and couldn’t take the heat directly for this escape. However, the classroom was my responsibility whether or not I was present! My fellow staff member, Kim, was being blamed for Marvin’s latest bust but she was at lunch, as well

When confronted by the principal I conjured up guts I didn’t know I had. I expressed the fact that Kim had also been at lunch therefore, she could not be held responsible for this student. I defended Kim and myself. I stood up to the principal, did what was right and she never picked on me after that. I got the

impression that she saw that I finally had a backbone so she would find someone weaker than me to pick on.

Pearl of Wisdom #2

Be true to yourself and stand up for what you believe is right. Follow your heart and tell the truth. As they say, it shall set you free.

Every teacher knows that an important key to a successful school year is classroom management. Some educators are naturals at it. The rest of us go to conferences, consult experts and read books to gain the knowledge, and still it is a challenge.

After eleven years of teaching I was crossing over from special education into a first grade classroom. I was overjoyed with the prospect of being able to teach reading, math and science. I had a master's degree in early childhood that I wanted to put to the test.

I spent the summer before going to conferences pertinent to first grade, coordinated lesson plans, made copies and designed bulletin boards. The first day of school I welcomed 26 beautiful, excited and squirming first graders into my life. I never imagined it would prove to be such a challenging year.

This school was in the lower socioeconomic, more multicultural end of our district. The children arrived with varying degrees of abilities and different knowledge bases about the world around them, not unlike most any school across the country.

The first few weeks, I think we, as teachers, expect classroom dynamics to be a little hectic as the children learn the routine. Little did I know this chaos would last long past the unofficial honeymoon period.

In this classroom I had both boys and girls who could be quite disruptive. More than a few belonged to this group. More than my share, I think. As my colleague across the hall sailed into the first grade curriculum, I was still trying to keep control of my charges. Having earned Pearl #2 early in my career, I did not hesitate to ask for assistance. I consulted the principal who observed me, offered

suggestions and recommended a book. I observed in other classrooms and got pointers from other teachers. I researched on my own.

I tried the techniques offered. Some worked, some did not. I continued to have that core group of little disrupters. It became very disheartening and stressful. At the start of the school year each child was evaluated to determine whether they were eligible for our reading assistance program. Those with low skills met one on one with an adult volunteer, 1-2 times weekly. Together they practiced reading. Out of my class of 26, 13 were eligible. That's half of my class. The other first grade teachers had far less than that. Did I have more than my share because I came to this room with a special education background?

Also, one boy in particular who was very disruptive had the skill level and behavior typical of a child labeled as special education. As a special ed teacher I knew this to be true; I just had to convince others. In my district it is the policy not to label a child Special Ed in first grade – unless of course it proves to be an exception.

Finally, those who needed to, arranged to test and evaluate this student. The process took far longer than it should have and this student who was eventually labeled educably-mentally-impaired was finally sent to an appropriate classroom in another building in the spring. He spent almost the entire year in my classroom contributing to the disruption. His absence did make a difference in the dynamics of that classroom. There was still a number of impulsive, talkative six-year-olds disrupting as that year came to an end. It was a year of disappointment for me as I felt as though I never got a good handle on that group.

Pearl of Wisdom #3

You never know what your class will be like. Successful classroom management is necessary for learning to take place. Do whatever it takes to be proficient in good management techniques before the start of school. Observe, read, consult, role play, spend time with parents of small children, attend behavior management seminars. Your success depends on it.