

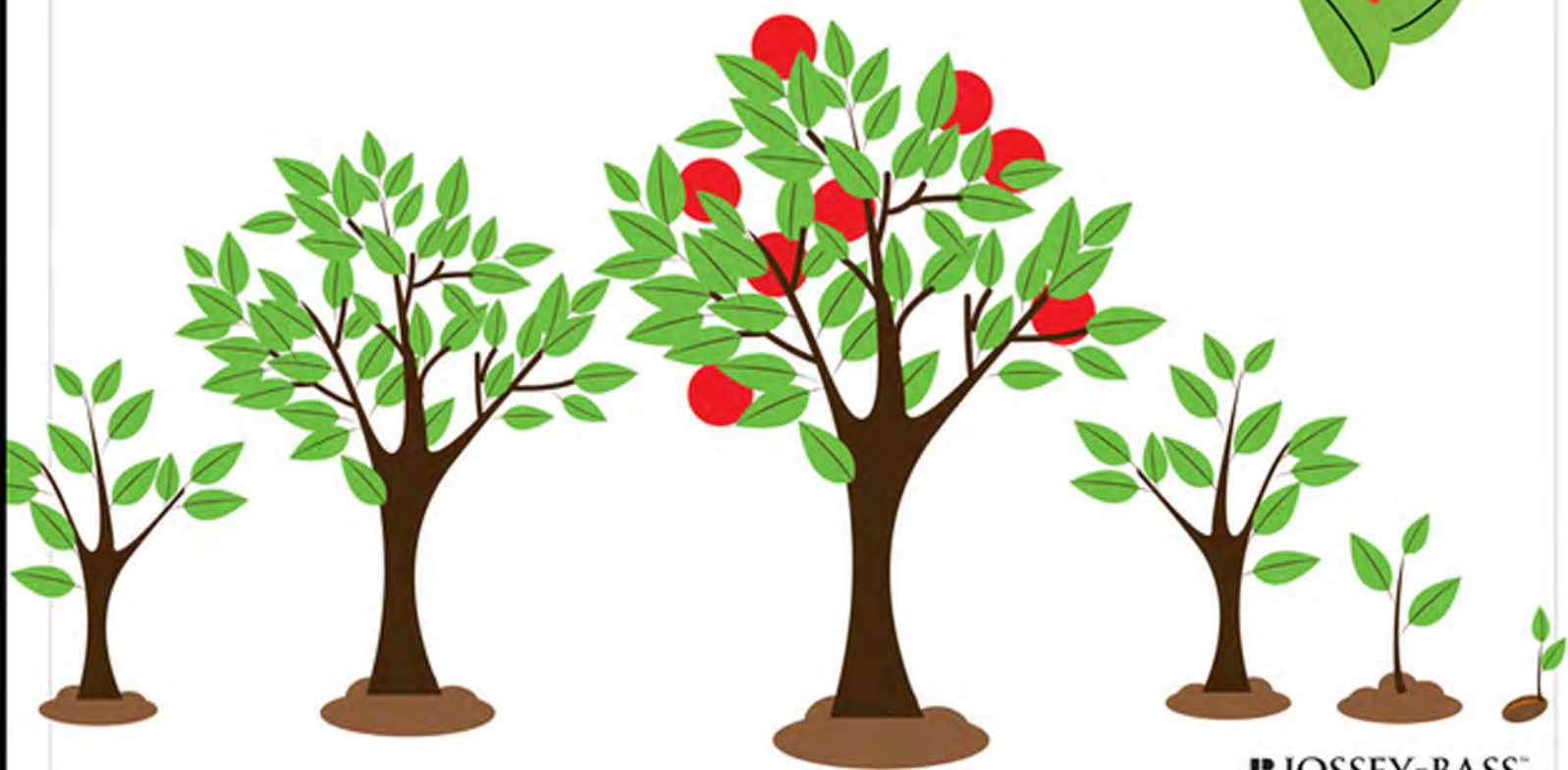
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THE First-Year Teacher's SURVIVAL GUIDE

*Ready-to-Use Strategies, Tools & Activities for
Meeting the Challenges of Each School Day*

Julia G. Thompson

Fourth
Edition



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About the Author



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Thompson recently retired as a classroom teacher but continues to be an active speaker, consultant, mentor, and advocate for first-year teachers. Author of *Discipline Survival Guide for the Secondary Teacher*, *First-Year Teacher's Checklist*, and *The First-Year Teacher's Survival Guide*, Thompson also provides advice on a variety of education topics through her website, www.juliagthompson.com; on her blog, juliagthompson.blogspot.com; and on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/TeacherAdvice>.

SECTION ONE

Begin Your Professional Growth

When you decided to become an educator, you entered a very special universe—one where your unique insights, energy, skills, and knowledge 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 classroom teachers who are your colleagues across the globe.

Our jobs are about far more important ideas than just the content we teach. Countless studies indicate that teachers are the most significant factor in any student's schooling. Although you may be tempted to think peer pressure or a student's home environment have more influence than you do, keep in mind that it is teachers who inspire students to become lifelong learners and to believe in their ability to achieve their dreams.

It is a classroom teacher who teaches a child to read, to do math, to cooperate with others, to write sentences, to think analytically, to do neat work, and to solve problems. It is a classroom teacher who protects a child from bullies and who is the first line of defense in the battle against racism, ignorance, and poverty. It is a classroom teacher who 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.

As a classroom teacher, you will never be rich, even if your district should come to its senses and pay you what you are worth. You will, however, be rewarded repeatedly because when you help your students achieve their dreams, you will achieve yours.

Few careers can claim to be as impactful as a career in education. Classroom teachers do change the world—one classroom at a time. Never doubt that, even on the toughest days, you are making a difference in the lives of your students. What you do *matters*.

Welcome to your new profession.

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 individual needs and abilities. Just how do successful teachers keep those responsibilities from morphing into demoralizing anxiety?

Good 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. Good 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, good teachers stay focused on the big picture—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 all teachers have had to deal with what you are going through. In fact, here are some of the most common challenges that all teachers experience:

- Finding a work-life balance
- Stacks of tedious paperwork
- Difficulty in connecting with parents and guardians
- Integrating technology appropriately
- A culture or generation gap with students
- Not enough equipment, materials, or time
- Short student attention spans
- Students with overwhelming family problems
- Uncertainty about the right course of action to take



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, 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 excellent teaching practices, it's not always a term with a straightforward definition. Instead, we tend to recognize it when we see it in action, but we may not be able to articulate exactly what it means. For many educators, though, professionalism means being the very best teacher that you can be every day. When you choose to develop the mindset of a professional

educator, you send the message that you are in control of your classroom, your professional responsibilities, and yourself.

It is not always easy to be an educator, especially when you are just starting out, but resolving to act in a professional manner is a sound decision with far-reaching effects. You will earn the respect of your students, their families, and your colleagues. You will be able to enjoy your school days instead of struggling with the unpleasant consequences brought about by poor decisions.

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 Twenty-First-Century Teachers

As a twenty-first-century teacher, you will be expected not only to maintain a well-managed classroom but also to establish a classroom culture of high performance for 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 master the material they are expected to learn. How will you know when you have created the productive culture of high performance that you want for your students?

- The classroom is student centered, with students taking ownership of their learning and responsibility for their success.
- Students are fully engaged in meaningful, respectful, and appropriate learning tasks.
- The overall focus of the work is goal oriented and purposeful.
- The teacher has classroom management structures in place so that students are confident about expectations for mastery of material, social interactions, and self-regulated behaviors.
- The teacher uses current research findings and best practices to inform instructional decisions.
- The teacher makes instructional decisions based on a thoughtful analysis of available data.
- Students move forward in their learning, mastering the assigned material and then moving on to the next topic under study. Students learn what they are supposed to learn.

Creating a culture of high performance is not a task that can be done in a day or two but rather requires consistent and sustained effort. It begins with the expectations that

you have for your students. Set high goals and expectations; make sure that these expectations and goals are ones that students perceive as achievable.

Knowledgeable teachers have found that it is impossible to create a culture of high performance without encouraging collaboration. Students who work together learn to support one another. Successful teachers also focus on helping students understand the importance of practice and effort in achieving success.

Finally, in classrooms where there is a culture of high performance, the students and their teachers take the time to acknowledge their triumphs and to celebrate their successes. The culture of this type of classroom is overwhelmingly positive and conducive to creating more success.

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

Professional Growth: Develop Your Skills and Add to Your Knowledge

As a classroom teacher, you will become a lifelong learner just by the very nature of the profession. It is simply impossible to be a good teacher and to not want to know more about the content you are teaching or about the best methods to instruct your students. One of the most intriguing recent educational movements is the proactive role that teachers now take in determining the kinds of professional development activities that work best for them.

No longer do teachers rely only on their districts' professional development programs; instead, proactive educators determine for themselves 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 that are available to you is a productive step in your quest to develop into the kind of teacher you dreamed of becoming when you first considered a career in education.

Use Action Research to Inform Classroom Decisions

The term *action research* has been part of the glossary of education terms for many years; it is a very personal and very effective way to learn how to solve common classroom or school-based problems. Action research is simply the research that educators do as they

go about testing new strategies and ideas, analyzing the resulting data, and then deciding how to implement their findings. It differs from scholarly or theoretical research in that it is solution-oriented and controlled by the members of a school community themselves.

In fact, at any given time in a school, there may be many different types of action research projects under way: individual teachers may be investigating ideas for their classroom, collaborative groups of teachers may be testing ideas that affect their grade levels or departments, and the entire school community may be involved in a large-scale exploration of a topic of interest to all. To begin the procedures in the action research process in your own classroom practice, follow these proven techniques for successful action research:

- **Step One:** Determine an issue or problem that you want to investigate. It can be as simple as asking why your students don't always complete their homework assignments or as elaborate as helping your students learn to use effective reading practices.
- **Step Two:** Formulate a potential solution and apply it to the problem. The solution that you apply should be something that you believe has the potential to resolve the issue or problem. Once you have determined a possible solution, systematically put it into practice.
- **Step Three:** Collect data. Depending on the problem or issue that you are investigating, the data can be examples of student work, standardized test scores, formative assessment results, or products of any other method that allow you to test the effectiveness of your possible solution.
- **Step Four:** Analyze the data you have collected. Your analysis will indicate if you should continue the implementation of your possible solution or if you should formulate another one based on what you have learned from your original data collection and analysis.

Action research will enable you to be methodical in the way you assess the effectiveness of new ideas; assume responsibility for your classroom decisions; contribute in a meaningful way to the culture of your school; and increase your own knowledge, skills, and confidence as an educator.

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 that you struggle not to be overwhelmed. However, if your school district offers you an opportunity to attend a conference, accept it. You'll benefit from the opportunity to learn new strategies and network with other professionals.

Participate in an Edcamp

An important part of the proactive professional development movement, edcamps (often referred to as *unconferences*) are participant-driven gatherings where K–12 educators can collaborate informally to share ideas and concerns with other like-minded educators in an inclusive and friendly environment. You can learn more about edcamps that would benefit you most from the Edcamp Foundation (www.edcamp.org).

Join Professional Organizations

One of the best ways to acclimate yourself to your new profession is to join an organization for education professionals. Joining a professional association is an excellent way to stay abreast of the latest developments and trends in education. Through collaboration and networking, you learn from other teachers with shared interests and concerns. Here is a list of some of the national professional organizations for teachers:

- **American Federation of Teachers (AFT)** (www.aft.org). The AFT is a teachers' union allied with the AFL-CIO. With 1.3 million members, AFT has been a strong voice supporting the classroom teacher for decades.
- **Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)** (www.amle.org). With more than thirty thousand members, AMLE is the largest national education association committed to the educational needs of young adolescents.
- **Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)** (www.ascd.org). This group is a nonpartisan, nonprofit national and international organization for educators at all grade levels.
- **Coalition of Essential Schools (CES)** (www.essentialschools.org). This organization provides professional development and networking opportunities, conducts research, and serves as a policy advocate for public education.
- **National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS)** (www.publiccharters.org). This nonprofit organization works to shape federal and state policy and advocate for funding as well as to improve the public understanding of the charter school movement.
- **National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)** (www.naeyc.org). This organization is the nation's largest organization for early childhood educators. Its focus is to provide support and resources for the educators of young children.
- **National Education Association (NEA)** (www.nea.org). With more than three million members, the NEA is the largest organization for public school teachers in the United States. It provides strong national support for educators at all grade levels.
- **National High School Association (NHSA)** (www.nhsa.net). This nonprofit association is dedicated to improving the professional knowledge of high school educators.

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. Subscribing to one of these journals will enrich your teaching experience in many ways:

- ***Educational Leadership*** (www.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*** (www.edweek.com). This journal is a weekly periodical devoted to up-to-the-minute news and commentary about education-related topics.
- ***Instructor*** (www.scholastic.com). This widely read magazine devoted to K–8 educational concerns offers practical support through a variety of timely articles.
- ***Kappan*** (www.pdkintl.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*** (www.learningmagazine.com). This is another supportive resource for teachers of younger students, offering practical advice on a wide range of topics.

Investigate the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

As a first-year teacher, you may not be eligible to work toward national certification, but it is a positive choice for teachers to make as early in their careers as they can. As you work to improve your overall teaching skills, you will also learn how to effectively teach the material in your state and district standards. You can learn more at the website of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (www.nbpts.org).

Explore Educational Websites

From elaborate and carefully curated sites to more humble offerings, online resources are a valuable resource for twenty-first-century educators. Once you have spent some time exploring some of the more well-known websites, additional research can help you find online resources tailored to your needs. Here are just a few of the more popular and useful sites available to teachers across the globe:

- **A to Z Teacher Stuff** (www.atozteacherstuff.com). This teacher-created site is designed to help teachers find lesson plans, thematic units, teacher tips, discussion forums, and printable worksheets as well as many more online resources.

- **Discovery Education** (www.discoveryeducation.com). This site offers an enormous wealth of resources for teachers—digital media, hundreds of easily adaptable lesson plans, worksheets, clip art, and much more.
- **Education World** (www.educationworld.com). This is an excellent general site for K–8 teachers in particular. It offers plenty of valuable resources, including free weekly newsletters.
- **Edudemic** (www.edudemic.com). Offering hundreds of articles on wide-ranging topics, Edudemic provides information on teaching trends and techniques as well as educational news.
- **Edutopia** (www.edutopia.org). This is a wonderful site for K–12 teachers. It offers timely articles, sage advice, videos, and a wide range of materials.
- **HowtoLearn** (www.howtolearn.com). An extensive and popular site, teachers can participate in various learning communities, enroll in online courses, learn new teaching strategies, and research various educational topics.
- **MiddleWeb** (www.middleweb.com). At MiddleWeb's extensive site, middle school educators can find many resources, articles, and useful advice geared to help them reach and teach middle school students.
- **Share My Lesson** (www.sharemylesson.com). At Share My Lesson, educators can access greater than four hundred thousand lesson plans, activities, and other resources shared by the more than one million members of the American Federation of Teachers who maintain the site.
- **Teaching Channel** (www.teachingchannel.org). Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Teaching Channel is a video showcase of innovative and effective teaching practices. Instead of traditional lesson plans, teachers can watch brief videos of effective teaching ideas that they may want to implement in their own classrooms.

Establish Your Own Plan

Many teachers use social media to create a PLN, or personal learning network. A PLN is simply a way for individuals to use social media to connect with other educators to collaborate, share ideas, and explore common professional interests. Many educators who want to establish a PLN start by following bloggers who post about topics they want to explore further and investigating social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

Educational Bloggers

- There are hundreds of insightful educational bloggers whose posts are not only interesting to read but also thought-provoking. Subscribing to several blogs with a variety of viewpoints can help you keep up with educational trends while learning

about new resources and strategies. In the following list, you will find just a few sites to begin this aspect of your professional development:

- **BAM Radio Network** (www.bamradionetwork.com/educators-channel). This site offers a wide variety of blogs for educators to follow. Carefully curated, the posts offer sound educational advice and insights on an enormous number of topics.
- **Cool Cat Teacher Blog** (www.coolcatteacher.com). Vicki Davis writes on a variety of useful topics and has interesting guest posts. She often has extensive lists of online resources that appeal to teachers of all grade levels.
- **The Cornerstone for Teachers** (<https://thecornerstoneforteachers.com>). At Angela Watson's blog, readers can find useful advice about many of the challenges facing classroom teachers.
- **Cult of Pedagogy** (www.cultofpedagogy.com). Jennifer Gonzalez's blog offers interesting, easy-to-read, practical tips about various classroom matters for all K-12 teachers.
- **Larry Ferlazzo** (<http://larryferlazzo.com>). Larry Ferlazzo's extensive offerings cover topics of interest to K-12 teachers, including a curated daily list of online articles. A prolific contributor to national publications, Ferlazzo also writes a blog for *Education Week* called Classroom Q&A (blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo).
- **My Island View: Educational, Disconnected Utterances** (<https://tomwhitby.com>). Tom Whitby's intriguing blog offers many ideas about educational technology, and its balanced and big-picture approach to major issues in education make it an unusually interesting and helpful resource for classroom teachers.
- **Smart Classroom Management** (www.smartclassroommanagement.com). On this site, readers can easily access the many useful, easy-to-implement tips and techniques related to a positive classroom environment found in Michael Linsin's frequent posts.
- **Teach Like a Champion** (<http://teachlikeachampion.com/blog>). Author of *Teach Like a Champion 2.0* and several other helpful books, Doug Lemov's blog offers well-written insights on many topics that can help you grow as an educator. In particular, his classroom management strategies are especially helpful for first-year teachers.

Social Media Sites

- **Facebook** (www.facebook.com/FBforEducators). With dozens of groups dedicated to educational topics, it's easy to connect with like-minded educators on Facebook. A good place to begin your investigation is the Facebook for Educators page.
- **Instagram** (www.instagram.com). Although it is possible to use Instagram as a classroom instructional resource, it is also an excellent site for anyone who wants

to connect with other educators and bloggers to explore topics of common interest.

- **Pinterest** (www.pinterest.com). At Pinterest, users can create personalized boards to organize their search information as they gather classroom arrangement ideas or find information about a variety of topics from innovative activities to the latest educational trends and classroom management techniques.
- **Twitter** (<https://twitter.com>). Twitter is an easy and productive way to join the global community of educators, stay current with education policies and trends, and learn from experts. In addition to maintaining your own Twitter account, you can participate in one of the many Twitter chats to share ideas and to learn from other educators. A good site to learn more about the many Twitter chats related to education is Participate (www.participate.com/chats).

Take Learning Walks and Make Snapshot Observations

Although it is not always easy to find the time to observe other teachers as they deliver instruction, the benefits of this practice far outweigh the hassles involved in arranging such classroom visits. 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.

Both learning walks and snapshots are especially good ways to learn more about how your colleagues 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 classroom leadership by observing how other teachers interact with their students.

Set and Achieve Professional Goals

Setting professional goals not only will give you direction and purpose as you begin to focus on the larger issues involved in developing into an effective educator but also will provide valuable baseline data so that you can chart a clear path for career success year after year. 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.

If you are uncertain about how to begin, Teacher Worksheet 1.1 offers a checklist of suggested competencies for first-year teachers to focus your goal setting and inspire your thinking. In addition, Teacher Worksheet 1.2 offers a template to track your professional goals, and Teacher Worksheet 1.3 will guide you as you take ownership of your professional growth as a teacher.



TEACHER WORKSHEET 1.1

Suggested Competencies

Consider some of these competencies appropriate for first-year teachers as you assess your strengths and the areas of your professional practice you would like to improve.

First-year teachers should be able to

1. _____ Set up and organize a classroom for maximum student achievement
2. _____ Collaborate effectively with colleagues and parents or guardians
3. _____ Take ownership of their professional development
4. _____ Manage professional responsibilities and duties
5. _____ Maintain a consistent work-life balance
6. _____ Manage stress with appropriate strategies
7. _____ Work with students from diverse cultures
8. _____ Teach students with various types of special needs
9. _____ Use student prior knowledge and preferred learning styles to differentiate instruction
10. _____ Plan lessons that align to state standards and district curriculum
11. _____ Vary teaching strategies to appeal to all learners
12. _____ Use data from formative assessments to inform instruction
13. _____ Engage students in student-centered learning activities
14. _____ Provide meaningful feedback to students and parents
15. _____ Adopt a problem-solving approach to resolve problems
16. _____ Appropriately assess student mastery of mandated content
17. _____ Establish an orderly discipline environment
18. _____ Prevent almost all discipline problems from occurring
19. _____ Use appropriate strategies when discipline problems occur
20. _____ Integrate available technology into instruction when appropriate

TEACHER WORKSHEET 1.2

Track Your Professional Goals

Using this template, teachers can record their goals and then record their progress for each semester of a school term.

Goal	Semester 1 Progress	Semester 2 Progress
Sample: Hold a quick recognition ceremony/celebration each Friday.		
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

TEACHER WORKSHEET 1.3

Be Proactive about Your Professional Growth

To guide you as you take ownership of your professional growth as a teacher, consider using this quick worksheet.

- If you have already used a method in the list, write *Complete* in the blank.
- If you plan to use one of the methods but have not yet done so, write *Yes* in the blank.
- If you do not want to use a method, write *No* in the blank.

1. _____ Use action research to inform classroom decisions
2. _____ Attend conferences
3. _____ Participate in an edcamp
4. _____ Join professional organizations
5. _____ Read professional journals
6. _____ Investigate the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
7. _____ Explore educational websites
8. _____ Establish your own personal learning network
9. _____ Take learning walks and snapshot observations
10. _____ Set and achieve professional goals
11. _____ Create a professional portfolio

Other Strategies for a Successful First Year

In addition to the responsibility of 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 maintaining work-life balance.

DEVELOP A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

It does not take long to realize that no one is a natural teacher. As educators, we cannot just rush through the hurly-burly of a school day, paying cursory attention to what we are expected to accomplish and then hope to be successful. Reflecting on our teaching should be part of every aspect of our professional lives. Such reflection needs to be systematic, methodical, and purposeful.

There are different ways to reflect on your teaching practice. Reflection can be as simple as a sticky note on a lesson plan or an audio recording stored digitally 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 journal online, in a computer desktop folder, on paper, or even in an audio format, it is important to be diligent about recording regularly. The questions that follow can help you use the time you dedicate to reflecting on your teaching practice as efficiently as possible:

- Are my goals for lessons reasonable and appropriate?
- Are my students challenged to do their best?
- Do students learn what they are supposed to master? How can I ensure that they always do this?
- At what points in a lesson did I have to change strategies or activities? Why? How productive was this flexibility on my part?
- How can I offer remediation or enrichment activities to the students who need them?
- What data do I need to collect before moving on to the next unit of study? How can I gather this information?
- What can I do to improve my skills when it comes to collaborating with colleagues?
- What worked in today's lesson? What did not work?
- How do I want my students to interact with one another as part of a whole group?
- What can I do to help my students collaborate with one another in small groups?

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

- How can I integrate technology into my lessons?
 - What problems did I have to manage today? How well did I manage those problems?
 - How well do I listen to my students? What can I do to make sure that I model good listening skills?
 - Which students were off task? What caused them to be off task?
 - When were my students on task? What can I do to make sure that continues?
 - 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 courtesy among my students?
 - How well do I manage my classroom? What can I improve?
 - How much progress am I making in improving my teaching knowledge or skills? What can I do to improve?
 - How can I use my strengths as a teacher to full advantage in my classroom?
 - What are my strengths as a classroom leader?

Teacher Worksheet 1.4 offers a template for professional self-reflection.



TEACHER WORKSHEET 1.4

A Template for Professional Self-Reflection

Using a template such as this one will make finding the time to reflect on your classroom practices a manageable daily routine task.

Date: _____

What lessons did I learn today?

How can I improve the way that I handled my academic responsibilities?

What problems did I find solutions for today, and what problems do I still need to solve?

What successes did I have today, and how did I achieve them?

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 help you become a successful member of the school community.

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 about 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 masterful at dealing with upset parents or who can make even the most disruptive student remain focused and on task. Soon you will see that role models for just about every aspect of your school life are all around you if you take the time to look and learn.

Tips for Working Well with an Official Mentor

Most school districts will assign official mentors to help new teachers during their first year. 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 not to hesitate to ask for help. Your mentor was also a new teacher once and has 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. Here are just a few of the day-to-day concerns that you can discuss with your mentor:

- How to handle planning and curriculum concerns
- How to use school technology
- How to obtain materials, equipment, and supplies
- How to work with parents and guardians
- 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 help students with special needs
- How to increase student motivation
- How to design differentiated instruction
- How to handle diverse groups of students
- How to evaluate students fairly
- How to incorporate a variety of teaching strategies

SEEK FEEDBACK ON YOUR PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

One of the most useful ways to grow professionally is to proactively seek feedback from a variety of sources. You can do this informally in many ways, such as watching your students' body language, looking at test scores, or paying attention to how often students are off task. 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 data as possible about your skills. 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 their opinions about classroom matters using the free surveys at SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com).
- Record or video yourself as you present a lesson.
- Ask a colleague to observe you for part of a lesson you teach.
- Use exit slips or reflection questions at the end of class to ask your students to comment on the day's lesson.
- Install a suggestion box so that students can offer advice and suggestions about classroom concerns.

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. 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 the specific part of the lesson you would like examined. 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 is also beneficial for a colleague to take a more detailed and systematic approach to the observation. One way to ensure an optimal benefit to this approach to peer observation is to use a worksheet like the one in Teacher Worksheet 1.5.

TEACHER WORKSHEET 1.5

Make the Most of Peer Observations

Use this worksheet to make peer observations as beneficial as possible.

Date: _____ Observer: _____

Planned class activities:

Special observation requests:

Observed teacher's areas of concern noted in advance:

Observer's response to the areas of concern noted in advance:

Positive teacher actions observed:

Positive student actions observed:

Questions for the observed teacher:

Suggestions for the observed teacher:

USE THE EVALUATION PROCESS TO IMPROVE YOUR TEACHING SKILLS

Evaluations can be of enormous benefit to you, or they can turn you into a nervous wreck; the difference is in your attitude. If you want to grow as a teacher, then adopt the attitude that your evaluators will offer you advice in areas in which you need to improve. Remember this: no teacher is perfect. Every teacher has areas of performance that can be improved.

One way to identify those areas is through evaluations. You can suffer through the process, or you can benefit from it. The choice is yours. 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 can expect one of your supervisors to discuss your goals and effectiveness with you in a pre-observation conference. If you do not already have a copy of your district's evaluation form and the other district information related to it, you should obtain these items. This is a good time to mention any problems you are having and to solicit advice.

You can also expect to discuss specific goals for the school year with your administrator. You will be expected to collect data and other evidence throughout the rest of the year to track how well you have met your goals.

Sometime after your pre-observation conference, your evaluator will make a planned classroom observation. At this point, the evaluator will be looking for your strengths and weaknesses as an educator. After the observation, you will meet with your evaluator again. At this conference, the evaluator will talk with you about the lesson you taught as well as about your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher.

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, when you are not a tenured 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. There should be no surprises in your final evaluation. If your supervisors believe that you are not an effective teacher, you should certainly have received some indication of that before the final meeting.

How to Prepare for an Observation

In many ways, informal visits by evaluators are much easier to get through 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 gives 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. Make sure that you have a copy of the supervisor's observation form if there is not a copy in your faculty manual. 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:** Keep your lesson simple so that you can do it well. The observer will want to see you interacting with your students, so do not plan a test or a video. Elaborate activities, such as a class skit or student debates, may not highlight your instructional skills very well.
- **Step Three:** Tell your students what is going to happen. Inform them that there will be a visitor in the classroom and that you would appreciate their cooperation.
- **Step Four:** Write out your lesson plan and collect extra copies of all handouts, textbooks, or materials needed for the lesson for the observer. Select an unobtrusive place for your visitor, and put these materials there. Be ready to show your lesson plan book as well as your grade book.
- **Step Five:** Get control of your anxiety. This is the most important step in your preparation. If you are ready and have a well-planned lesson, you do not have to worry. Expect to be nervous, but also expect to do well because you have prepared thoroughly.

Turn Criticism into a Positive Experience

One of the most difficult aspects of being observed and evaluated is hearing negative things about your teaching performance. Veteran teachers will tell you that although it is not easy to have a supervisor discuss the problems with your performance, such criticism can be conducive to professional growth. With a professional, open-minded attitude, 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:

- Go into your evaluation conference with paper, a pen, and an open mind. Be prepared to hear negative as well as positive comments about your performance.
- Listen objectively. Most of the criticism will probably cover issues you have already started to address yourself. If you find yourself becoming defensive, stop and try to remain objective and open-minded.
- Listen more than you speak. Ask for advice and suggestions for improvement, then listen carefully, write them down, and follow them.
- After the conference, when you have had an opportunity to correct some of your weaknesses, keep the administrator updated on your progress in following his or her suggestions.

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 achievement 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 controversial. Some of the problems with the use of value-added assessments can include missing past test scores, past test scores that are not comparable to present ones, or even test scores that could be skewed by various factors.

As controversial as this method of assessment may be, many school districts today 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 to avoid being adversely affected by a value-added assessment:

- Look at your students both as individuals and as part of an entire group. Although you may design instruction for the group, keep in mind that it is individual students whose test scores will be compared.
- 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 maintain accurate records of your students' mastery of the subject matter. This will allow you to correct gaps in knowledge or skills as necessary.
- Be aware of the populations in your class, such as the children of poverty, students who are reluctant to learn, and students who do not speak English as a first language, who are at the highest risk for poor performance on standardized tests. This knowledge will enable you to intervene early to help them succeed.
- 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 those students who may be struggling. Involve support personnel as well as adult and peer tutors to help those students.

What to Do if Your Evaluation Is Poor

Almost every thoughtful evaluator will offer recommendations on how you can correct weaknesses in your teaching performance, but there is a difference between those constructive 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 master 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:

- Am I clear about exactly what my noted areas of weakness are and what I am expected to do to remediate them?
- To whom can I turn for assistance?

- 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 and firing 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 not a topic that should be the subject of gossip at school or, even worse, among your students or their families. Do not vent indiscriminately or discuss your evaluation with anyone other than trusted 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. Refusing to sign the evaluation can be regarded as an insubordinate act on your part.

Finally, you should learn about your legal rights as an employee of your school district. Contact your local education association representative 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. As a tool to showcase you to prospective employers, a portfolio can reveal a great deal of useful information about you and your teaching experiences. However, as a new teacher, you will find that another valuable result of the creation and maintenance of a professional 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, 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 your classroom setup and decor
- 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
- 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

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 idealistic 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 stress due to a harmful 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 satisfactory personal

life. The key? Finding a balance between the challenges of a new career and such personal needs as maintaining friendships, meeting family responsibilities, and pursuing other endeavors that bring fulfillment and joy to life. To learn how to be one of those successful teachers who seem to have found the right balance between their personal and professional lives, consider putting some of these suggestions into practice:

- Make time for yourself. Eat well. Exercise. Count your blessings. Plan enjoyable activities. Your students will not thrive if their teacher is exhausted and stressed. Take good care of yourself if you want to be able to focus on caring for your students.
- Don't lose sight of the big picture. No one can teach every part of the curriculum or reach every student or make every school day a success. What you can do, however, is realize that each school year is not a sprint but a marathon. It takes patience, determination, and a clear idea of the desired outcome for runners to complete a marathon; the same is true for teachers.
- See the opportunities in your problems. When you have a problem at school, try to think of it as an opportunity to learn new professional skills.
- 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 need 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. For example, it is not wise to give out your personal phone number. Although there will be many after-school demands on your time, learn to gently refuse those that will be too demanding or unproductive.
- 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 planning a weekend excursion or an outing with family and friends or even setting aside time to work on 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 from one class to another. This is particularly difficult when you have many classes each day. One way to manage this is by 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.
- Delegate responsibilities. Decide who you want to do a task, clearly explain how you want it accomplished, and then step back and allow the people you selected to get busy.
- 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.
- Learn to pace your instruction to allow for some less intense teaching periods. You should not be “on” day after day. Instead, allow your students time for independent work, small-group work, or even such activities as viewing films related to the subject under study.
- Add structure to your life. Routines will prevent many stress-inducing problems. Putting your keys in the same place every day, for example, will save you frustration later.
- 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 weaknesses and correcting mistakes.
- Think before you act. If you plan your responses to unpleasant situations, you will prevent many problems. Situations that you should think about before you act include dealing with incomplete homework assignments, angry parents, defiant students, cheating incidents, tardy students, and other frequent classroom disruptions.
- Take advantage of the assistance your district may offer its employees. Many districts offer various types of mental health assistance to its employees. Often referred to as

I try to leave the emotion of work at work. I take paperwork home, but I try not to take the emotional stuff home. My husband and I have a ten-minute rule. We can each vent about our jobs for ten minutes at dinner, then that is it. No more. Move on. Tomorrow is another day.

Mary Landis, 22 years' experience

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.

- Start to put together a network of supportive and positive people who can help you. Being connected to others 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.

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

Having a bad day at school? Try the following strategies to banish the stress that comes with a bad day at school:

1. Go to your school's media center and escape into a good book or read a newspaper for a few minutes.
2. Talk things over with a sympathetic colleague or mentor.
3. Take a brisk walk around 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 (www.calm.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. The Internet radio station Pandora (www.pandora.com) makes it easy for listeners to create personal listening stations.
11. Eat a healthful snack. Junk food will cheer you up for only 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 (www.mindfulteachers.org).
13. Acknowledge that 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 the 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 "My students need 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 e-mail from your principal telling you that she 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 and your mentor do not have a common planning period. How can you find the time to work together?
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 near and far benefit from your own professional learning network?
5. What problems can you anticipate that you will have 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 observing you and in being observed themselves
- How to manage school-induced stress and maintain a 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. If you are like other teachers, you are understandably nervous about the evaluation process. How can you make sure that you know what to expect and how to prepare for it?
3. How can you find the time to start a program of sustained professional growth and still take care of 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 maintain your fresh idealism as you go through the ups and downs of your first year as a teacher?

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