

Dear First Year Teacher: You Are Amazing



You are incredible. You may not know it yet, but you have made the decision to forever change the lives of thousands of tiny humans (or not so tiny, depending on which grade). This is not something to take lightly - if it was an easy job, schools would be full of passionate and motivated teachers. Regardless, you now have the responsibility to give your very best every day, and to give even more the next day. As you embark on this journey, you may find yourself second-guessing your choice, feeling overworked and undervalued, and in need of a major vacation. You are entitled to all of these emotions. While you feel these things, though, don't forget to also feel and recognize the following:

There Is No One Like You

There are many different types of teachers - think about all of those that you have encountered throughout your educational career. No matter how much those teachers and experiences may have shaped you, you are now your own brand of amazing in the

classroom. Take what you have learned, embody the likeness of those before you, and make it even better. You are here because you are meant to be, and you now have the chance to impact others in the same way that those who came before you made an impact on you.

You Are Enough

Whenever you start to doubt yourself or compare yourself to others, look inward. Trust your instincts. If you do this, you will always teach the best way you know how.

Feeling like you aren't doing enough? That's more common than you think. There will always be something you think you should improve or change, and that is what makes you so fantastic. Think about your favorite teacher - he or she felt the same things you are feeling now, but as a student, is that what you noticed? No. You are harder on yourself than any student will be. You are more than enough as you are.

You Are Changing Lives

Are you aware of just how much influence you have when you stand at the front of the room every day? You get to choose the type of experience you provide for your students. You get to choose how they remember school and the way it made them feel when they reflect on it 20 years from now.

In what other profession can you say you have the power to do something so enormous that you change the course and path of 25+ students every year for your entire career?

You can be someone's safe space, their coach, cheerleader, form of structure, and even guardian angel. You will wear many hats, and you will excel in every one of them. To be so many things to so many people is power not to be taken lightly, but to be relished with pride and honor.

You Are Loved

It may not always show on your students' faces or in their actions, but you are loved beyond measure. You will spend more time with these students each school year than most parents will with their own children. There will be times when you have to be hard on them, and it won't be easy, especially when you feel that you have broken the bridge between you and them. There will be times where you have to build up your students, almost obsessively so, and your efforts won't feel valued. There will be times where you will put a smile on your face when all you want to do is cry. You will face all of these moments, constantly, and each time they will make you second-guess yourself. The fact of the matter is, these students will love each of these versions of you - either in the moment, or much later down the road. Showing you care comes in many forms. Try to remember that it is the same for your students. So, no matter how hard your day has been, or how many difficult decisions you had to make, remember that you are loved.

You will feel many emotions as an educator, and you will continue to feel them no matter how many years you put in or how much experience you get. The most important thing to remember is that all of these emotions are what make you a phenomenal teacher. Continue to push yourself, and make yourself better, but don't let the ups and downs deter you from the bigger picture: You are doing just fine. In fact, you are doing amazing. You are here because you are meant to be - you have power, you are loved, you are life-changing, you are one of a kind, and you can do this.

A letter from a 6th-year teacher

It is a strange time to begin the teaching journey because all those **veteran teachers** around you have also become, in many senses, new teachers. All of us are re-learning how best to serve our students, how to plan and re-plan and how to adapt to a whole new environment. Use this to your advantage. Ask for help and seek experienced teacher's advice, but also know that we are all going to be facing the same challenges and navigating new territory together! You also come with a perspective that does not rely on the practices and traditions that many of us have become comfortable with. You

can provide new ideas and are more adaptable than we, who have been teaching longer, might be!

If you're feeling anything like me, the most stressful part of going back is being able to imagine what it will look like. My school leaders have gone from an in-person plan to hybrid, as well as planning for an inevitable return to remote learning. I've had time to think about each option and will share my own tips, as well as tips from others. As you read them, start to **imagine yourself in the classroom** (virtual or physical) with your new students. I'll break it down into the 3 possibilities for the 2020-2021 school year.

In Person Teaching & Learning

1. Capitalize On Team Building

I'm going to say this for every section. The benefit of being in person is that students can more easily connect with one another. Take advantage of this time and prioritize team building. These are the skills students need and want to practice, and it will help you **get to know your class better**. Whether you are teaching elementary, middle or high school, community building is going to be the most important thing you do this year. Ask the returning teachers what types of structures your school already has in place for team building, for example, morning meetings.

2. Scaffold Remote Learning Practices While You're In the Classroom

Unfortunately, it seems as though remote learning will be an inevitable reality at some point this school year. Use your time in person to help scaffold the transition back so you and your students feel prepared. If you are going online and using a platform like Google Classroom, incorporate Google Classroom use and assignments into your in person days. The more practice students have with the **resources that will be used remotely**, the more time you are creating for high quality learning.

3. Set Aside Time to Talk About the "Why"

Being in person means that there will also be lots of **new guidelines and safety precautions**. Set aside time to let students ask questions and understand the reason for all guidelines (old or new). This will help students buy into the expectations and it will give them a space to express their concerns, confusions and anxieties. This is not a typical school year, so there is no reason you need to pretend it is. If you don't know a reason why for something, be honest and then follow up by asking your administration, leaders, or a fellow teacher help you with the why.

Hybrid Teaching & Learning

1. Capitalize on Team Building During Time Together

I'm not kidding, I'll say this every time. There is nothing more important this year than **building community** among your class. The sense of belongingness that comes with being a part of a team will help you and your class face the many challenges that come with a year of learning and a year during a pandemic. When you are in person, designate time and structures that focus on team building.

2. Build Community Across Pods and Groups

Many hybrid plans involve splitting students up. The challenge here is going from two classes to having four different classes. Brainstorm ways (or research because you don't need to reinvent the wheel) to bring remote students and in person students together. You could do this virtually, or through letters and notes. But it's important for students to feel like they belong and are moving forward together this year.

3. Scaffold Independent Work for Asynchronous Learning/Remote Learning

Many hybrid plans also involve students completing work independently during their remote days. Whether they will be doing work virtually or on paper, scaffold this process. Even for high-schoolers, it is helpful to have a plan and steps that will provide students with structure and support when they are on their own. For your planning, it

may also be helpful to follow the same format when students are remote. For example, remote days are always a **mini-independent project** or a research day. That way both you and students know what to expect and you can focus on refining skills, rather than coming up with something new every day or week.

Remote Teaching & Learning

1. Start with Team Building

Have I mentioned how important team building is? Remote team building poses distinct challenges. If your students are equipped with computers and reliable technology then having virtual team building sessions is a great way to start. There are many ideas online from companies who have done virtual team building in the past. If your students are without technology, the next best thing is writing letters, **postcards** and making each other small gifts. If you're able to organize a safe outdoor meeting once a week or month, that can also provide an opportunity for students to be with each other. No matter what, keep community building on the top of your priority list. It will be what students remember far more than what they were able to accomplish in math class.

2. Designate Time for One on One or Small Group Check-ins

Check-ins can be by phone, video, or even stopping by 6 feet away (depending on how small or geographically close your school community is). Remote learning takes away many of the important pieces of in person learning, like seeing your students each day and recognizing when there might be something going on outside of school. Check-ins (hopefully weekly or more if you feel comfortable) can provide a space where students can **share how they are doing**, ask for help or just talk with you. Of course, it will take time to build relationships with students, so ease into these check-ins and don't take it personally when students don't want to share. If your check-ins are consistent then students will know they can rely on the meeting and rely on you.

3. Have an End of Day Ritual

This is key. When you are remote, you are probably in your own home and the line between work and home is gone. Still, you can redraw that line by creating an end of day ritual to mark the end of school. This can be a walk, making yourself a cup of tea, calling a friend, anything that will help you transition from working to being home and relaxing. This is especially hard during the first year of teaching. I remember staying at school far too late and trying to plan every single thing. You will need discipline to make this happen, and it's helpful to have someone who will hold you accountable to your plan to stop working. Trust me, teachers can work forever, but you'll never feel like you're done. **Set a time and step away.** You'll still do just fine!

Advice for Every Option

1. Get to Know Your Co-workers

This will be more challenging this year because it's not as easy to go to a restaurant after school on Friday or have teacher get-togethers. If you can, make time to hang out with your co-workers or ask to set aside a "coffee date" to ask for advice and learn more about the school. Just like your class needs to feel a sense of belongingness, you do too! It is so much better when you have teammates helping you face all of the challenges that teaching will bring this year. Still, try to avoid teacher gossip. That can break down a sense of belongingness and pit others against each other. Focus on building strong relationships!

2. Make Time for You

I probably should not have put this second because this is **so important**. I'm sure you've heard that you can't pour from an empty cup. It's true. This year is going to exhaust you in ways you never could have predicted. Again, it's going to take discipline at first, but you need to set aside time for you. Hang out with friends on the weekdays, give yourself a spa day or "vacation" day. You will need this to be the **best version of yourself** for your students and your school. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

3. Do Not Reinvent the Wheel

You've probably heard this phrase before too, at least I hope you have. Do not reinvent the wheel. There are curricula and resources that teachers have created before you. It's okay to rely on those while you get a better sense of what and how you want to teach. You can still be critical of the resources you're using and work to ensure that a **diverse group of experiences and voices** are represented, but that does not mean you have to make everything yourself.

Lots of things are going to be **different this year**, not just for you. Some things will probably be the same as my first year teacher. You'll be too hard on yourself at times, and you'll feel like you're failing. Maybe you are, but just like we teach our students, failing is a necessary part of learning. You will also never forget your first class. So, take a deep breath and get ready for a wild ride. You're going to do incredible things, whether it feels like it or not and we're going to make it through together.