



Teachers, Return Back to School with Balance & Boundaries

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After July 4, teachers realize that summer is almost over, and the classroom call is growing louder each day. Some of those teachers entered summer break on fumes. I'm talking car broke down, wheels falling off, Jesus take the wheel type of situation. Yes, the last month of school seems like a gauntlet of every type of activity imaginable, but unfortunately, it wasn't the end of the year gauntlet that caused this situation. The situation slowly started to build on the first day back into the school building at the beginning of the last school year. It has been

said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. I am suggesting that all teachers use a portion of the time left to make a game plan for the upcoming school year.

Teacher Back to School Time

After grinning and bearing it through those welcome back from summer break icebreaker activities (also known as finding an excuse to go to the bathroom or refilling your coffee cup time for the introverted teachers), there are whole days and, in some places, whole weeks of sessions and activities teachers must complete. This is where teachers start making poor choices. If it can be avoided, teachers should go home at the end of the day when they are released. If not, teachers should not spend more than one hour after that time. That means no hanging around in the halls and chatting. This means prioritizing tasks. They should start with tasks that involve student safety or have a firm deadline from the school administration. Tasks will be there every single day until the last day of school. There is no reason to use school tasks as an excuse to fall back into bad habits of not having a balance between work and home.

School Calendar

Teachers need to add dates from the school calendar to their personal calendar. If teachers can't squeeze this in during the back-to-school time in the school building before the school year starts, they should do it at home before the school year begins. If the teachers have children, they should start with their own children's calendar first. Too many times have I committed to doing a task at the school that employs me, but it conflicts with an event for my children. Essentially, I chose my job over my kids. It was poor planning on my part. Now, I start with my kids' calendar and then add on important work dates. My own children must take priority.

The First Week of School

We all know that, like the last month of school, a lot is jammed packed into the schedule during the first week of school. Teachers are not going home at contract time during the first week. Dismissal will take forever! Teachers should have a plan to make the evenings at home that week as smooth as possible. I was married almost 16 years ago, on August 5, 2006. I started my first teaching job two days later, on August 7, 2006. Now, with these balanced calendars, I have been at work on my wedding anniversary. Some schools in Indiana even start

back in July! I still think it is wrong for kids to go back to school even before the Indiana State Fair begins. In the last few years, I have had my life together. Some years, we take time off from work. This means my own children get to be in the care of my in-laws when the school year starts. Guess what? My sons love it, and so do we. If we don't take off time, I make my husband responsible for dinner and make him the primary parent to supervise bedtime during the first week of school. I am spent physically and emotionally that first week of school. All I want to do is sit down, kick up my feet, and chill. Yes, you read what I said earlier correctly. Sometimes I have taken off of work at the beginning of the school year to celebrate my wedding anniversary. I don't love my husband because of his paycheck, but this two-income home situation is nice, and education jobs do not pay enough for me to live the way I want to live. I have to pay the mister some good attention if I want to keep that fire burning. When that fire is burning, and I am fulfilled through other ways outside of work, I am less likely to burn out from the j-o-b.

Work Email

I have said this many times on my personal website and on Indy K12. Take your work email off of your phone. Determine times when you will answer your email and stick to it. If I check my work email at home, it is on my computer. If I do check it, I only check it once. If I choose to respond, I schedule the email to arrive to the recipient the next morning. Some people, especially those administrators, be trying to go back and forth with you via email. Listen, you are not about to stress me out on my personal computer while I am at home. No, thank you!

School Activities & Committees

Relationships are key in schools, relationships between colleagues, and relationships between teachers and students. Participating on a committee or with school activities is another way to build that bond. Some schools force people to do a certain number of activities. I can understand mandating a back-to-school night or parent and teachers conferences, but the other activities should be staff choice. Trust me. There is nothing worse than choosing to work an event after school with colleagues who are forced to be there. Talk about an awkward situation. I normally identify how many events or committees I can do. Honestly, for a few years, I tried to do none and would only attend a few events to support kids. We are all in different seasons in our lives. People who have young children or people who have elder care do not have the same amount of time available as others. Even if a teacher is single, that teacher has a right to a life and should not feel forced to do too many extra tasks. Once I have identified those events or commitments, my response is something like this when I am asked

to do more. “Ooooh, I wish I could. I have already committed to three events this year. I really don’t have the bandwidth to add more.” Trust me! If the person who asked the teacher does not find someone else, the person will come back and turn up the heat. They might end up dangling the students in front of the teacher. “What about the students?” The teacher should be firm and repeat the answer that was already given. I also suggest adding, “I would appreciate it if you didn’t circle back after I said no. It makes me feel as if you do not value my needs and priorities.” Then, walk away. Some people want an explanation, but again, we are prioritizing the teachers’ needs. Standing around explaining is not time teachers have to waste.

Contract Hours

Teachers may not get told this in college, but it is hard as hell to stay within contract times especially if they teach certain subjects. I was an English teacher for years. Prep time is not enough time to grade essays. This means I had two choices: stay late for long periods of time, or make a plan for when I would stay late or come in on another day. Each year it has varied based on my own children’s needs. One year, I left at contract time every single day, but I worked in my classroom for hours on Sunday after church. Other years, I picked a couple of days of the week and stayed for one to two hours. What is key is that I had a designated time. I also communicated this to my students. “Mrs. Barnes, when am I going to get my essay back?” First off, I had given feedback throughout the entire process so I would start my telling my students that they should already at least know if they are going to earn a passing or failing grade. Second, I would communicate a reasonable deadline for us both. Third, I will tell my students how long it would take me to really grade the essays well. Fourth, if I was being extra (that is the word my students would use) I would make them calculate how long it would take based on the time I shared it took me to grade one essay. Grades, tasks, lesson planning, absolutely nothing, should result in any teachers being chained to the school building and being there all the time. As a teacher who worked from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. in my classroom early in my career, I am screaming this: It is not sustainable.

Teachers, what tips would you add?