

Five Recommendations for Beginning Teachers



Dr. Tyrone Howard

Senior Fellow, ICLE
Expertise: Equity & Cultural Relevance
@TyroneCHoward

A large, perhaps disproportionate, number of new teachers will be working in our nation's under-served and under-performing schools. Most of them will be unprepared for rigors, frustrations, and demands facing them in their classrooms. A disconnect between pre-service training and early career experiences is evidenced by the large number of new teachers who leave the profession at the start of what they had imagined would be long, fulfilling careers. A disturbing number of teachers leave during their very first year. Learning Policy Institute researchers state that 50% of classroom teachers in Title 1 schools leave within the first three years, and that the turnover rate of teachers in schools serving the largest concentrations of students of color is approximately 70% higher than teachers in predominately white schools.

In many ways, teachers are being trained to teach in classrooms that no longer exist. Many teacher-education programs fail to instill in novice teachers the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and awareness to succeed in today's schools. Increasing diversity, social/emotional needs that disrupt student learning, and rising standards and expectations placed on students and teachers have contributed to classroom teaching becoming one of the most demanding jobs available. Pre-service training has not kept up.

Too often, what new teachers think the job will entail comes nowhere near reflecting what it actually does entail. High teacher turnover is costly to districts and harms student learning. So, we who are committed to new teachers must help them succeed at and stick with their plan to make a difference through classroom teaching. The future depends on it.

To that end, I offer these five recommendations for new teachers as they step into their first schools and classrooms. Each is doable. Following each will help them address the deep challenges of the first year and build in them the strengths to embark on what they trained for: a long, successful teaching career.

Please share these with the new teachers in your districts, schools, and lives

1. Build Relationships—not Friendships—with Students

Establish meaningful, authentic relationships with your students. Teachers too often seek to be liked by their students. It is far more important to be respected and trusted by them. Build a relationship with each student that is caring yet stern, loving yet honest, demanding yet nurturing, supportive, and encouraging. Of course, you will have expectations

of your students in their relationship to you, but even those expectations exist to educate your students. From the start, please be clear: your relationships with students are not mutual friendships. You must form and manage those relationships for the sake of each student. Steep your classroom relationships in care, consistency, and warm connectedness that focuses on students' development and well-being. This approach will go far toward making your first year more manageable and will set you on a career-long path of effective teaching.

2. Expect a Roller-Coaster Ride

Get ready: Your first year of teaching will almost certainly feel like an internal roller-coaster ride. You are bound to experience a broad range of emotions: nervousness, excitement, fear, anxiety, elation, disappointment, joy, frustration, incredulity, satisfaction, and more. Many days, you'll go from one to its opposite with nauseating speed.

Buckling in to "enjoy" the ride takes planning, perspective, and resilience. The key is to stop yourself from falling too low during the drops and flying too high at the peaks. Keep in mind why you chose this career. Expect reasonable progress, and then celebrate amazing breakthroughs. Remember that you, too, are learning, which means that you, too, will sometimes fail. Note the feelings, and then move forward, just as you would have your students do. Allow yourself to notice and celebrate those many, often tiny, moments when you are making a positive difference to someone.

Expect highs and lows throughout the year, sometimes throughout a single day. You've buckled in, so the extremes won't throw you. As this year ends, the ride will slow to a stop and let you safely off (until next fall, when you'll find yourself getting right back on line for another turn).

3. Ask for Help and Find a Mentor

All beginning teachers struggle at some, or many, point(s) in their first year. The key is not to be overly self-critical. When you do struggle, remember that the career you've chosen is a difficult one. Struggle is natural; most teachers—even experienced ones—face it.

But do not stop with this acceptance. Be proactive in your own success: ask for help. Every school has experienced and outstanding teachers. Ask them for input into your plans and insights about your practice. Query them about their strategies as you craft yours.

Seek out a mentor from among these colleagues—a skilled, experienced teacher with whom you can relate and who is willing to invest in your development and success.

Invest in, deepen, and sustain your connection with this mentor. Any seasoned teacher will tell you that finding and staying connected with a mentor makes a huge difference in the first year and beyond.

4. Connect to Students' Caregivers

One of the most effective ways to get to know your students is to connect with their caregivers. Students are often raised not or not only by parents, but also—or instead—by grandparents, relatives, foster parents, older siblings, and/or other guardians. Learn who each of your student's caregivers are and reach out early.

It is vitally important that you introduce yourself to your students' caregivers. Tell them about yourself; ask about their students' interests, likes, dislikes, strengths, dreams, and aspirations. Express to students' caregiver(s) that you plan to do everything you can to make it a good year for the children at school.

Be clear about what the caregivers can expect from you as a teacher throughout the academic year. Commit to communicating, but be careful not to over-promise. Seek input from a mentor if you are unsure what would be a reasonable amount and frequency of teacher-initiated caregiver contact in the first year.

Invite the caregivers to contact you to share insights and news that can help you help their child in school. Supply your preferred contact information right up front.

Communicate that you are excited and honored to teach this child, and eager to be the caregivers' partner in the child's well-being.

5. Believe Us: It Gets Better

The first year of teaching can be brutal. It is certainly among the most difficult and demanding professional undertakings. Seasoned teachers often shudder when thinking back to their first year of teaching.

Believe this, please: it gets better. This is especially true when you come into your first year with eyes wide open, willing to face challenges for which you may not have been prepared.

The teaching profession will always be demanding: physically, emotionally, psychologically, and financially. The work, often rewarding, is also often incredibly trying. As you grow your skillset and gain insight and experience, you will be better prepared to overcome challenges and succeed in achieving your goals.

To survive your first year, and really, the first several as a beginning teacher, you must take care of yourself. There is no badge of courage awarded for burnout. Insist on getting enough sleep. Remember to breathe under stress. Refresh yourself by scheduling time to pursue your hobbies, socialize, and be active. Respect yourself and this choice you've made to do the incredible work of educating children.

You have chosen the single most important profession in the country and on earth. Teaching changes lives, inspires minds, provides hope, and offers students—and let's face it, the country and the world—a pathway to a better future. Give it your all every day. Find sources of support and insist on some balancing self-care. Keep believing, especially when things get tough.

The struggle can and will get better!

About the Author

Dr. Tyrone Howard is a Senior Fellow at the International Center for Leadership In Education®.

Get to know Tyrone and explore the latest research on equity in the classroom at hnhco.com/TyroneCHoward

