

# GETTING STARTED

## CREATE A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

(WEEKS 1–8)

The beginning of the school year can be quite hectic. Preparing for those first weeks of school directly influences how you will kick off your school year. During these eight weeks, it is really important to focus on getting to know your students and creating the routines that you will use all year long. To create a community of learners you need to focus on your students' needs and how you will present yourself to them.

The experienced teachers in this section will share their stories, their mistakes, what they learned, and how they have changed their practices to be more compassionate teachers.

Schedule time each week to read and reflect on what is most useful to you and write your insights in a personal journal or use the online option on the companion website. (Visit the companion website at [resources.corwin.com/WeeklyWisdom](https://resources.corwin.com/WeeklyWisdom).)

WEEK

1

# GIVE STUDENTS A FRESH START

Meaghan Calkins

*9 years*

Since my first year of teaching, I have taught high school freshmen. I was told, “This class coming is just awful!” I decided my very first year that I was not going to listen to the opinions about the upcoming freshmen, and I was going to give every student a clean slate and a new start.

I tell each one of my freshmen classes this, and I believe it resonates with the students as an opportunity to truly become who they want to be perceived as. I learned very early on that there are truly no “bad” students; they are just kids trying to do the best they can given circumstances they had zero say in. In short, I realized my own professional affirmation: If you can get a student to trust you, then you can get that student to do anything!



I give every student a clean  
slate and a new start.

## Practical Wisdom for the Classroom

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Consistency, consistency, consistency! I cannot express enough that any classroom policy or expectation you state during the first couple days of school must be upheld all year long. Idle threats will get you nowhere. Gray areas of classroom management will confuse students. Create fair routines and procedures, and if you do have to change them, explain why.

## Take Care of You

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In my first year of teaching I was full of motivation and eager to “change the world one student at a time!” I soon realized that before I can help someone else, I need to make sure I am taking care of myself first. To a novice teacher, I would say there must be a point in the day when you unplug from work. You will never feel like you have “completed everything.” Therefore, now is the time to learn to keep your health and well-being a priority—before you experience teacher burnout early in your career. Make every effort to maintain any healthy habits that you had prior to becoming a teacher. For example, if you exercise in the morning, keep exercising in the morning. If you read the paper and enjoy a cup of coffee in the morning, continue to do that. Do not work 24/7.

## ●●● I TAKE CARE OF MYSELF FIRST.

### PAUSE. REFLECT. ACT.

Hearing that an entire class is “awful” can be a daunting message to a new teacher.

- How will you share your positive view of your students’ potential with them?
- What will you do this week to support your growth as a teacher?
- What will you keep doing that is good for you?

Write your responses to the prompts in a journal to further your reflection and to help you remember what you are learning. An online journal for your use is available on our companion website ([resources.corwin.com/WeeklyWisdom](https://resources.corwin.com/WeeklyWisdom)). ●



WEEK

2

# MAKE STUDENT CONFIDENCE YOUR GOAL

Jessica Concha

*4 years*

One of the biggest lessons I have learned in my career is the value of nurturing your relationships with all of your students. Every year, you will have a variety of personalities in your classroom. Some students will naturally participate, engage in class discussion, and share about their personal lives. Other students may not feel comfortable doing such things. Thus, it can be easy for more introverted students to feel overshadowed or unnoticed. Further, because these students are less likely to approach you on their own, it is critical that you as the teacher set out to develop your relationship with them and continually seek opportunities for their personal growth. I made it my mission to seek out students that struggle with communicating with others and with speaking up during class discussions.

I once had a student with autism who was very afraid to engage in conversation with her peers or to interact with her teachers. I made it my goal to find ways to gradually increase her confidence in communicating with others.

Early in the school year, we set a goal for her to raise her hand at least two times during the day. At the start, before asking a question, I would tap on

her desk two times to warn her that I was going to call on her (a strategy my co-teacher recommended). She would then know to raise her hand when I asked the question, and I would call on her.

As time progressed, her confidence in engaging in class discussion grew exponentially. One afternoon, I took time to pull her aside to let her know how proud I was of her progress in participating in class and stepping outside of her comfort zone.

I told her that I wanted to send a letter home or make a call to her parents to express how delighted I was in her growth. Her beaming smile is an image I will never forget, and a constant reminder of the importance of lovingly pushing students to achieve their full potential. Since then, she raises her hand voluntarily, asks to come up to the board, and is genuinely excited to share her thoughts with the class.

My experience with this student taught me not to become discouraged if I didn't see results right away. I also learned the importance of consistently pushing students toward achieving their goals—even if they become frustrated or lack motivation or confidence.

Beginning teachers should set out to identify opportunities for personal growth in each of their students, even those with whom it may be difficult to form a relationship. It is very easy to get caught up in students' grades and perfect scores. However, throughout my career, I have observed personal and social growth can dramatically influence academic success. Your students are with you every day—be sure to invest in them emotionally, not just academically!



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## Practical Wisdom for the Classroom

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I have learned that there is no benefit in interrupting class to discipline a student. If anything, it gives the student more attention, and sometimes students act out for that very reason. If you have a student misbehaving, find ways you can communicate that the student needs to make a change in behavior or work effort, without relying only on verbal discipline. Talk to students individually and quietly at their desks and remind them of your expectations and be sure to be at eye level when you are speaking to them. You can also establish nonverbal cues to communicate that they need to adjust their behavior.



## Take Care of You

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Managing your time during the school day is key to avoiding burnout and stopping work from interfering with your personal life. Be sure to maximize the time you have blocked off to create or review lesson plans, grades, etc., to avoid having to complete those tasks at home. It is important to make time for the things you enjoy—not only on the weekends but also during the week.

### ●●● I GIVE MYSELF PERMISSION TO LOG OFF AT THE END OF THE DAY.

#### PAUSE. REFLECT. ACT.

Jessica's message about helping students be more confident is important to your role as a teacher.

- How will you interact with students who may not be on task?
- How will you schedule your free time?
- What will you do this week to support your growth as a teacher?

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WEEK

# 3

## CREATE ROUTINES FOR EVERYTHING

Linda Howard  
*30 years*

As a beginning teacher, you will often feel overwhelmed. If you have opportunities, especially during your practicum, observe a variety of classrooms. You will take the best from each teacher and create a learning environment that works for everyone. Prioritize your time by making decisions about what's important for you to focus on in the classroom. One BIG thing I learned in my career as a teacher is that students come first. Everything else is just stuff.

This goal helped me to filter out situations that were out of my control and to keep focus on my students. It's easy to get wrapped up in day-to-day things that, in the long run, do not improve your quality as a teacher or the learning environment of your classroom. I'm very appreciative of everyone who occasionally reminded me that I'm there first for the kids. It then became a natural part of my teaching and classroom culture.

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## Practical Wisdom for the Classroom

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The first six weeks of school are very important. Getting-to-know-you activities during the first weeks of school help build a community in the classroom. One activity that I found kids enjoy, and that helps them learn a lot about one another, is a human scavenger hunt. Some examples of what students would ask: Find someone who . . . walks to school, has brothers or sisters, is an only child, likes to swim, and so on. It's a fun activity that gets kids moving and gives them a chance to speak to everyone.

## Take Care of You

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A group of teacher friends and I, every Wednesday after school, went for a 3-mile jog. It's one of my fondest memories because not only did I get a decent workout, but the camaraderie also grew each week and each year. Plus, it was a great idea-sharing and venting time! It helped take care of both my body and mind.

## ●●● I ENJOY CREATING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS.

### PAUSE. REFLECT. ACT.

Linda spends a lot of time getting to know her students and having them learn about each other.

- How will you get to know the students in your classroom?
- Why is this time well spent?
- What will you do this week to support your growth as a teacher?

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WEEK

4

# LEARN ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS' FAMILIES

Adam Pelletier

*18 years*

When I started teaching, I didn't think about the home life of my students. I learned to pay more attention to this when I had several students failing in my class, and I needed to call home to tell the parents. As I prepared for the calls, I reviewed the files in the school office and discovered each of these failing students had a challenging home situation. One lived with her grandparents, one student's file had a note on it that said, "Don't talk to the father," and another file mentioned that this student had to stay home periodically to babysit for siblings while mom worked. This experience gave me a better understanding of what was preventing these students from participating fully in my class. Now, I know that learning about *all* students' lives outside of school helps me to better understand their challenges. After I learned about the family life of these students, I released my judgment about why they were failing my class. It became less about me as their teacher and more about them. Each of these three students had a different family issue that was preventing them from being consistently successful. I learned to modify assignments and talk to students when I noticed them failing. I am glad I discovered this because it has made me a more effective teacher.

I learned to modify assignments and talk to students when I noticed them failing.



## Practical Wisdom for the Classroom

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One way I create a community of learners in my classroom is to take a photo of each student at the beginning of the school year and invite each student to write a short bio to place next to it. One year I had them write a list of qualities using the letters of their first name, and other years I have had them write about their hobbies, favorite movies, or just anything that they love to do. The students love to read about each other and find out what they have in common.

## Take Care of You

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Teaching can be all consuming, and it is hard to turn off my mind at the end of the day. One way I shift my focus is to cook. I love to make bread, pizza, and even donuts! It might not be the healthiest hobby, but it sure does taste good, and it takes my mind off school and the problems from the day.

## ●●● I INTENTIONALLY INTRODUCE MY STUDENTS TO EACH OTHER.

### PAUSE. REFLECT. ACT.

Sometimes we don't know why students are failing.

- How does Adam's message inspire you to learn more about your students?
- Review the school records and talk with the students who may be disengaged so as to learn more about their lives outside of school. What did you learn?
- What will you do this week to support your growth as a teacher?

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WEEK

# 5

## TRUST YOUR IDEAS

Lisa Dix  
*17 years*

We all know a handful of teachers who get stuck and stale. . . . It is September, so I will pull my September file out and teach what they have always taught every September, no matter the group in front of me or any outside environmental factors. I was hired to teach Grade 4 with a team of two other teachers who had been together for quite some time. They had a “system” of how they did things and did not deviate from “the way things had always been done.” My philosophy was more about shaking things up, keeping things interesting, fresh, and fun, so I went against their system throughout the year by doing things MY way—like inviting parents to view a wax museum, sharing pickles on toothpicks and punch because that was a character’s idea of fancy in a required novel, assigning monthly reading challenges to increase or instill a love of reading, and hatching chicken eggs complete with birth announcements and pink and blue streamers in the hallway. These fun events and assignments kept my classroom buzzing with engagement. My colleagues constantly were going to the principal to speak to her about me and how, in their opinion, I was not following the curriculum. I am proud of myself for doing what I knew was right, what felt best for the students I was working with.

Since that experience, I have run into the families of that class who have thanked me for helping their children become pleasure readers or who remember the chickens hatching or who still have the poster or project they made from a reading challenge they participated in. I get random comments on Facebook from former students sharing the positive impact I made on their life. THAT is why I went into teaching! It can and does get uncomfortable when you have to deal with negativity and pushback, but my message to new teachers is to do what feels right, march to the beat of your own drum, and knock it out of the park, because it is totally worth it!

These fun events and assignments kept my classroom buzzing with engagement.



## Practical Wisdom for the Classroom

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I have always believed in the power of humor and have made it a point to laugh with my students, laugh at myself, and share those funny school moments with my family around the dinner table. I wish, in hindsight, I had written a journal full of all the funny comments and happenings to share with new teachers because one thing I know to be true is that we cannot take ourselves too seriously. Laughter is the BEST medicine.

## Take Care of You

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A year ago, I became a grandmother to a beautiful baby girl who has blessed and changed my life. I am more present in the moments we are together, and I've reevaluated my priorities to put myself and my family first. A FaceTime call, a text image, or a quick weekend visit with my grandchild are enough to restore my soul, settle my brain, put a smile on my face, and reset my attitude so that I am a better person at home and at the office.

## ●●● I LAUGH WITH MY STUDENTS.

### PAUSE. REFLECT. ACT.

There will be times when you have to step outside your comfort zone and do what you think is right.

- How does Lisa's message guide you to make decisions that are good for you and your students?
- Are you including your sense of humor in your teaching?
- What will you do this week to support your growth as a teacher?

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WEEK

6

## BE A TEAM PLAYER

Jennifer Barrientos

*9 years*

While I worked in a self-contained classroom for children with emotional and behavioral disorders (Grade 2–4) for a teacher who had resigned, I inherited a caseload of six students who had extremely high needs and paraprofessionals who would come and go. My students did not know how to be students; they were merely showing up each day. I was lucky enough to have a behavior specialist who had good relationships with some of the students and responded quickly to big behaviors. There were several instances where the behavior specialist and I had to work in harmony to ensure students were safe and accounted for.

In addition to specific personal experiences, my mentor and supervisor once said to me, “If I’m not part of the problem, I can’t be part of the solution.” This has been a tenet in my leadership philosophy for years. She means that if I don’t figure out what my part in this problem is, it will be very hard for me to find a solution.

I realized that my structures, procedures, and calm presence were the most important aspects of getting through each day. It wasn’t my instructional strategies, my knowledge of brand-new techniques, or how Instagram-worthy my classroom was. It was the basics, similar to parenting, that got us through each day. That, and strong communication between the adults.

We had serious behaviors every day for the first few weeks, but because we worked so strongly as a team, our students eventually came around!

I know that when all staff in a classroom are on the same page and demonstrate a unified front, students follow classroom procedures.

I learned that we, as the adults in the classroom, needed to be calm—always. We quickly learned that when we were dysregulated, so were our kids; when we were upset, our kids felt that and reciprocated. We also quickly learned that our little people were going to do what they needed to in order to get what they wanted—which normally meant they would strategically ask the adult that they thought would give it to them! My behavior specialist and I communicated all the time, via text, in person, and via email, before school started, during the day, and after school to debrief. While we communicated constantly, we laughed always.

I know that when all staff in a classroom  
are on the same page, students  
follow classroom procedures.



## Practical Wisdom for the Classroom

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Take the first few weeks of school and practice procedures constantly. You cannot get to academic growth without your students knowing your expectations. Teach every single routine you expect them to do. Revisit your procedures after long weekends, breaks, or whenever you feel you are losing structure.

## Take Care of You

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I tend to be in “work mode” all the time, and this makes me feel anxious. When I leave my work computer at work and come home to cook dinner, it shifts my focus. When I change my clothes and talk to my son about his day, it helps me to be present in my home life. I also love to read for fun before bed, so I’m not on my phone checking emails. This helps me go to sleep more quickly and to sleep better through the night.

### ●●● I AM CALM.

#### PAUSE. REFLECT. ACT.

As you read Jennifer’s wisdom this week, assess your level of calm with students in your classroom.

- Do you work in a team and need to align your procedures?
- How are you intentionally shifting from work to home life?
- What will you do this week to support your growth as a teacher?

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WEEK

# 7

## EMBRACE YOUR MISTAKES

John Radosta

*31 years*

When I was a very new teacher and terrified that I had neither the knowledge nor the control a teacher should have, I explained a word to the class incorrectly. A student who had always been very active in discussion corrected me, and even though I knew she was right, I was too scared to admit having made a mistake. I thought it would take away from the little credibility I'd earned. Instead, I argued with her until she gave in and agreed I was right. I saw the light go out in her eyes.

Almost immediately, I realized the damage I had done. The student never spoke in class again. I realized that I had prioritized my own comfort over her education—the very thing that was most important—and I had lost the very respect that I thought I was protecting. To this day it is the teaching moment I regret the most.

As painful as the experience was, it was one of the most important lessons I've ever learned—that my first concern in teaching has to be the students' well-being. I also realized that I gain respect by giving it and by admitting I'm a learner too, that I'm not by any means an omniscient expert. In fact, I make multiple mistakes a day, right there in front of the class.

Now, instead of hiding mistakes, I encourage students to correct me in class, and praise their attention and knowledge. I also administer surveys several

times a year to measure whether I am reaching them in the best manner possible. I tell them it's my report card, and that since I judge and grade their performance all the time, it's only fair that they get to do the same for me. And then I share the results, good and bad, which holds me publicly accountable. Now I strive to earn their trust, not their respect, and I do it by making myself vulnerable, not by putting on armor. I've found that it helps all of us to learn to take risks—we learn more and in more comfort.

Now, instead of hiding my mistakes,  
I encourage students to correct me in class.



## Practical Wisdom for the Classroom

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For me, time management is stress management. I've had to learn that teaching is a draining job, even as we are givers by nature. I learned that putting every waking moment toward preparing actually made me less prepared because I was too anxious to work adequately with students. By forcing myself to step back and do other things—to have a life away from school—I was happier, more approachable, and better organized.

## Take Care of You

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It sounds counterintuitive for someone trying to make a good impression as a team player, but I think it's important to be able to say *no* once in a while. There are many opportunities to pitch in at school. But you have to pick the ones that most fulfill your vision of being a good teacher, and the ones that you can best contribute to. Then you can recharge by stepping back and letting others help with the load as well.

### ●●● I GIVE MYSELF PERMISSION TO SAY NO.

#### PAUSE. REFLECT. ACT.

As you read John's wisdom this week, think about the times you have felt vulnerable.

- How have you managed these emotions?
- Is there something you need to say *no* to?
- What will you do this week to support your growth as a teacher?

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WEEK

# 8

## FIND A MENTOR

Kathi Rogers

*50 years*

Mentoring new teachers did not exist when I began teaching. You did your student teaching and then when you got a job, you were deemed to be *ready* to go. The department head who hired me over the summer had died, and I came in cold to a department that was struggling to recover. The interim department head was faced with numerous challenges. In my first year, I made tons of mistakes—big and little—thinking I could leave the building for lunch, trying to break up a fight in detention and having my skirt ripped off, allowing a hockey player to nap in my English class while being observed (after having sent him to the office several times for doing just that and getting nowhere). It became clear that the school and I were not a good fit, and I left after one year and went to a neighboring district. At this new district, I was informally mentored by two wonderful colleagues, and I stayed there for the remainder of my career. What made the difference for me was mentoring and the relationships that I made because of it.

What I learned through this experience is that relationships matter in teaching, and mentoring is one of the most important ones for a new teacher. My two mentors listened to me without judgment, took me “off the roof” on bad days, and supported and praised me when I got it right.

What I also learned, and have passed on to new colleagues, is this: when teachers are supported in their first years of teaching, they become better teachers for their students and better colleagues for each other.

What I learned through this experience is that relationships matter in teaching, and mentoring is one of the most important ones for a new teacher.



## Practical Wisdom for the Classroom

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We were required to give homework assignments each term, and they counted as a specific part of the grade. I wanted homework to be a reinforcement of things that I had taught in class. Also, as a single parent whose son spent part of his time at his dad's home, I understood that getting homework done was not always given the same priority in different homes. What I did was give out half a term's worth of homework (in a packet format) at a time with a due date at midterm. Some students would stay with me after school a few days each term to get the work done on time; others would turn it in within a week or so. Some might wait until the last minute. But it gave my students a chance to get reinforcement and credit, and parents were grateful for the packets. I always had extra packets for those students who might have left their work at the other parent's home.

## Take Care of You

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This idea saved me a lot of time in the morning. Plan what you are going to wear to school each day of the week on Sunday night, and put your clothes out for the next day—everything, including jewelry, shoes, and so on. This is one less thing that you have to think about in the morning when—trust me—you will be tired and rushed. Some days the only thing that might go well is how you look! And that is important. I actually kept a “clothing calendar” of what I wore each day. It also helped me to discover what was in my closet and get my money’s worth out of my wardrobe. I know it sounds silly, but it worked for me for over thirty years.

## ●●● I DRESS FOR SUCCESS.

### PAUSE. REFLECT. ACT.

Kathi’s message about finding a mentor is an important one.

- Is there someone at your school who is supporting you?
- How does your professional dress influence your confidence as a teacher?
- What will you do this week to support your growth as a teacher?

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