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Working Smarter

Most of us were taught to finish our work before we played. But as a teacher, such a work ethic would condemn you to a life without play! You are never going to finish your job. There it is, in black and white. When you picked teaching, you selected a profession that never has a sense of closure.

You cannot say, "Well, I'm finished teaching that child. Now, I'll move on to the next." You never get to sigh at the end of the day, "I'm all caught up. There is nothing else I can think of that needs to be done today, so I guess I'll go home now." Yet these truths are not reasons to grab the Help Wanted ads and see what else you can do with your life. They may, however, impel you to develop some new attitudes.

Try on These Attitudes for Size

Here are three ways of thinking about teaching that may help you set some goals related to "working smarter" so you have more time to do what you want.

1. *You are expected to do a good job, not a perfect job.* You were hired to do one main task: successfully help children learn your subject area of expertise. People will demand that you do well on any aspect of your job that directly relates to this task. They will not demand that you be superhuman and do a perfect job, nor will they insist that you do an exemplary job on the "frill" tasks related to your teaching assignment. You have to admit in your heart of hearts that you know you will not be fired because your bulletin board isn't perfect or because you agreed to be on only two of the three committees on which you were asked to serve.

Acting as if you have to do every aspect of your job perfectly is perfectionism, and perfectionism isn't a virtue. Many people answer the standard interview question about their weak points by saying, "Well, I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist." They think they are answering this negative question in a way that puts them in a positive light,

but they aren't. Perfectionism is a bad habit that must be overcome. The perfectionist is not yet skilled at sorting the important from the unimportant and setting priorities. Not all things deserve to be done equally well. Approaching your job with this attitude in mind will help you set logical limits and use your time wisely.

2. *You deserve a fair wage.* Teaching is not a nine-to-five type of job, nor is it a job in which you punch a time clock and get paid by the hour. However, it is still a job. Your employer simply hires you at a fair wage to do an honest job. Your employer does not buy your entire life! The reality is that the smarter you work, the more you get paid per hour. Also, the more efficient you are, the more you're free to enjoy your favorite activities and spend time with your loved ones. Looking at the following case studies will show you how this works. Both of these teachers have been identified as outstanding by their peers and by administrators. The work they do is comparable, and their salaries are \$42,000 per year (\$1,000 per week for 42 weeks).

Typical week for Mrs. C

Arrives at school 7:45 A.M.
(Teaches from 8:30 A.M. to 3:00 P.M.)
Leaves school—4:00 P.M.
TOTAL SCHOOL HOURS: 8.25

Works at home—none (except for one or two emergency situations per year)
Weekends—none
TOTAL HOME HOURS: 0

Equivalent Hourly Wage—\$24

Typical week for Mrs. M

Arrives at school 7:30 A.M.
(Teaches from 8:45 to 3:10)
Leaves school—4:30 P.M.
TOTAL SCHOOL HOURS: 9

Works at home—2 hours per night
Weekends—4 hours
TOTAL HOME HOURS: 14 hours

Equivalent Hourly Wage—\$17

Based on 16 nonsleeping hours per day for seven days a week, we have 112 available hours per week. Mrs. C spends 41.25 hours working, leaving her 70.75 hours to enjoy the rest of her life. Mrs. M is working 59 hours a week, and giving herself only 53 hours to be with family, friends, and self. The difference between Mrs. C's schedule and Mrs. M's results in Mrs. C getting paid more per hour and having more leisure time. Using some of the techniques in this book would allow Mrs. M to continue to be a good teacher and simultaneously improve her situation.

Again, both these women are doing a superb job of teaching. The only difference is that one is making better use of her time and, therefore, has more time at her disposal.

3. *You deserve a life outside of teaching.* Your family and friends deserve to spend time with you. You were, are, and always will be first and foremost a person. Your role as teacher, while honorable and extremely valuable, is merely a way of contributing to society and earning a living. Take a moment to think about all the other roles you

fulfill: parent, spouse, best friend, church choir member, biking club president. Imagine that your time is limited and you have to prioritize all your roles in order to live a sane, happy life. Well, your time is limited, and you *do* have to prioritize.

You have to slice up the pie and decide who gets what size piece. This may seem like a hard task (and it is), but it is even harder and more frustrating to act as if the pie is limitless when it is not. If you don't deliberately slice up your pie, everyone is going to keep jumping in with his or her fork, grabbing pieces, and making a mess.

Also, if you slice up the pie instead of letting others hack away at it, you can be sure to save good-sized pieces for those who are most deserving. Although your role as teacher is very important, your roles as spouse, parent, and best friend are unique and irreplaceable. Your students will have lots of good teachers, including you, who will put together the pieces of their educational puzzle over the years. On the other hand, you are your children's only mom or dad, and this is their only childhood. You are your spouse's only partner, and this is his or her only life to share with you. You and the important people in your life deserve time together even if you have chosen the honorable profession of teaching.

Changing Attitudes Takes Practice

It is natural to respond to these challenges with a "Yes, but . . ." reaction. Right now, it might seem as if it would be harder to change your mind than put up with the stress of too much work in too few hours. If you find yourself thinking that, you may not be quite ready to make a big attitude change. You may want to start by picking out one little part of something in the previous pages that made sense to you or caused you to think in a new way. Talk it over with a family member or a colleague. Decide on a few small changes you might like to consider and get an ally to support you.

On the other hand, you might feel like you are fed up and want to "get a life," as the popular saying goes. If so, you might be ready to make a major overhaul in your thinking.