

Eight Things All Teachers Wish They'd Known When They Were New

Countless how-to articles have been written for new teachers, but many of them state...well, the obvious.

Get plenty of rest.

Eat well.

Take care of yourself.

Let's face it. This is the kind of advice that can make you roll your eyes or feel pressured into thinking you suddenly need to start cooking and exercising.

Here are eight practical tips from teachers who have survived those early years in the classroom and can help you do the same.

1. **Know your building rep.** If you are called into a meeting with an administrator about a disciplinary matter, don't go it alone. Have a union representative with you. Your building rep is your contract enforcer and ally.
2. **Know your contract.** Your collective bargaining agreement represents the protections negotiated by fellow union members who came before you. It contains important information about your salary, benefits, and other rights to which you are entitled.
3. **Don't volunteer for everything.** First-year teachers often feel the need to say yes to every request. Your teaching responsibilities will consume a great deal of your time in the first years, so minimize commitments for noninstructional duties that are not part of your contract.
4. **Know your neighbors.** Your experienced teaching colleagues have been at this for a while and can give you a wealth of tips to save time and aggravation. They might know, for example, that the copier jams if you use tray 2. It might be common knowledge that the custodians like the chairs put on the desks on Friday. If your weekends are spent correcting tests and papers, they might offer advice on changing your exam dates.
5. **Keep your certification current.** You might be surprised that letting your certification lapse, even for a day, can immediately impact your paycheck and your employment. After your initial certification period, make sure you keep up with the expiration date. This is your responsibility and not the responsibility of the school district in which you were hired. Even if you do not have the full amount of money necessary to renew your certificate, you should still send in the \$50 application fee and the required paperwork at least six weeks in advance of your certificate's expiration date in order to be sure that your certificate is renewed in a timely manner. Your employment depends on it.
6. **Keep copies of your personal and professional records in a safe yet easily accessible place.** This is as important as keeping your gradebook and lesson plans organized. Having appropriate documentation on hand can be critical to your placement on the salary schedule, resolution of misunderstandings, and a fair and accurate evaluation. Keep the following documents and/or copies in one convenient spot:
 - Teaching certificate
 - Records of in-service education or advanced academic credit
 - Performance evaluations and your responses or comments

- Letters of praise, directive, or reprimand
 - Record of college attendance, dates, and degrees
 - Transcripts of undergraduate and graduate degrees
 - Record of accumulated sick leave and personal leave days
 - Copies of teaching schedules for current and past years
 - Records of incidents involving student discipline, violence, or other disruptive student behavior
 - Copies of correspondence with administrators
 - Copies of correspondence with parents and colleagues
 - Copies of all documents in your personnel files. (Personnel files are generally kept in your district's superintendent's office. You should review your file annually to be sure you know what is in it. Keep copies of any disciplinary items.)
7. **Be prepared in case of a nonrenewal notice.** Before becoming tenured, teachers may be notified in writing by May 1 that their contracts will not be renewed for the coming year. (Often teachers who receive this notice are ultimately renewed—for example, when budget issues are addressed.) As soon as you receive a notice, request letters of recommendation from supportive district administrators and colleagues. For guidance on next steps, talk to your CEA UniServ Representative.
8. **See if you qualify for student loan forgiveness.** Before you pay off or consolidate your loans, talk to a professional about the possibility of debt forgiveness, income-driven repayment plans, or other student loan assistance. CEA provides free, 90-minute workshops for members—Degrees Not Debt—that can help you make sense of your options.