

What I Learned on My First Day of School

- By David McGrath | guest column
- Sep 1, 2025

“Teaching is a ten gallon bucket in which teachers are expected to carry fifteen gallons of stuff ...”— Forbes, Oct. 21, 2021.

If only I had a police uniform. Or at least a badge.

I am standing at the front of a study hall in an urban high school on my first day as a teacher. The room is as large as a church, and with my astigmatism I barely see the back row of oak desks that are bolted to the floor. Each one has a worn brass number tacked on the chair back, from 1 to 100.

Not quite full capacity, I’m seeing roughly 70 students, though an accurate headcount is difficult since the only teenagers actually in their seats are those who appear to be sleeping, torsos draped across desktops. Most of the rest are standing, milling in small groups, talking and laughing preposterously loud, or so it seems, since the acoustics were apparently done by an architect who designed bowling alleys.

The rest of the students are strolling up and down the aisles, a couple kneeling over something at the back of the room, one girl dancing to a song in her head in a private but public display for her boyfriend seated in front of her, and several boys hanging out of the 8-foot tall, partly open windows, one having a high-temperature shouting match with an apparent rival on the sidewalk below.

I have five English classes, but every teacher’s assigned one school duty, and mine is this study hall. I assume that the bell to start the period will end the mayhem. When it rings and that does not happen, I try calling, “Quiet, please,” and then, “Please be quiet so I can take attendance,” after which I just start calling names, which elicits laughter when I apparently mispronounce “Joaquin.”

I step forward and shout as loudly as I can without screaming, “Excuse me!” which manages to produce a momentary lull.

“Everyone needs to be seated for compulsory attendance taking.”

“Talk English, man,” a voice from the back.

“I gotta pee, Mister,” says the dancing girlfriend.

How are you supposed to do this, I wonder. Will there be reinforcements?

I have a free “preparation” period after study hall that gives me a chance to visit the faculty men's room. I am a pack-a-day smoker, and today I have much more than the usual craving.

Also ducking in for a smoke is John Potocki, another new hire who assists in coaching the football team; Al Saunders, a shop teacher and former basketball star who at one time had been signed by an NBA team, though never rostered; and Frank Cahill, another shop teacher who, I noticed this morning, arrived in the faculty lot in a camper van.

Thanks to nicotine's addictive power, we will gather here several times a day, and they fast become my work friends.

A former star lineman for NIU football team, Potocki is a mountain of a man squeezed into a suit jacket and teaching U.S. history. He sits stiffly on the edge of a sagging black loveseat in the men's room and puffs on a menthol cigarette.

“I don't have a study hall,” he says, “but you gotta give them the look, you know, like you mean business.”

I mention the large number of students.

You have to isolate individuals,” says Cahill. He wears a shop uniform, a thin blue overcoat with pockets worn over his shirt and pants. He smokes Kents and holds a cigarette as you would a soiled tissue. “Talk to them en masse, and they don't feel obligated to listen.”

“Yeah, all that,” says Saunders with a smile. He's sitting way back in a wooden lounge chair, so that the former NBA prospect's knees jut in front. He wears a maroon cashmere sweater and stone-washed jeans and does not look like the other shop teachers.

“These kids play dumb, but they know what's happenin’,” says Saunders. “You just put it to them, man: ‘You want an education, or the street?’ Ain't no other thing.”

I am sensing that suggestions from others on how to be an effective teacher are abstract. Like trying to tell an aspiring stand-up comic how to be funny.

So for the rest of that first week, and for the next 20 years, I learned through trial and error. And though I could write a book of do's and don'ts for beginning teachers, plenty have already been written, and they must experience "baptism by fire" and make their own way.

But when I'm asked for advice, three things I share. First, over prepare for every class. Have a detailed lesson plan, but also a Plan B. Second, be yourself, not some stultified version of what you think a teacher should be. Third, always do what you think is right for your students, not what you're told by a colleague, the author of the textbook or an administrator long gone from the classroom.

It may take time, but abiding by those principles you acquire the all important confidence to teach. When you're confident, students can hear it in your voice. See it in your eyes. Your posture.

A teacher with no confidence turns them into saboteurs. They can't help it. But when you are confident, they are relieved. They can relax and just learn.

At which time, in a year two or three, you will come to enjoy the creativity, human interaction and rewarding sense of accomplishment that's possible in the classroom, and which makes being a teacher the best job in the world.

Former Hayward resident David McGrath taught at Chicago Vocational High School for 20 years and is author of "Far Enough Away," a collection of his columns and stories. Email him at profmcgrath2004@yahoo.com.