



BEING AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER: REAL-WORLD TIPS & STORIES FROM WORKING TEACHERS



Teachers helping teachers.

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January, 2010

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CHAPTER ONE

TEACHER INSIGHT



“I tie sneakers, zip coats, wipe tears, and plan classroom celebrations. I listen to struggling readers and guide beginning writers. I help children understand that there is a big difference between 14 and 41. I read stories and laugh a lot. I sometimes cry. I know more ways to spell Megan than anyone would think possible... I find something special in every parent’s child and make sure they know it.”

About this eBook

The purpose of this book is to help students and career changers get a taste of what it's really like to be an elementary school teacher. We set out to do so by inviting elementary teachers actively doing their work in classrooms across the country to tell us about their experiences. Dozens of teachers generously shared their wisdom and guidance. The result of this work - which we call "Career Stories"- reveals the rewards, challenges, frustrations, and the do's and the don'ts of being a teacher in today's world.

We've included 25 representative Career Stories in this eBook, but you can find **many more elementary school teacher career stories on our web site.**

Career Story Elements

Each Career Story is in the original voice of an elementary school teacher and is composed of several parts:

- Description of and insights into each teacher's job
- Tips for prospective teachers
- The best and worst parts of being a teacher
- The teacher's educational preparation
- The teacher's previous experience
- Additional thoughts on being and becoming a teacher

Spread the Word

This book is available free of charge and may be freely distributed in electronic or print format. Professors, career counselors, guidance offices, education writers, and others are encouraged to send copies to students and other interested parties, and to link from their web sites to the document.

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CHAPTER TWO

TEACHER INSIGHT



“I love meeting new students every year and having old students return to visit really reinvigorates me. I thrive in an atmosphere of change and flexibility and would not trade the opportunity to work with kids for anything”

Elementary School Teaching as a Career

What’s in this chapter:

- *A teacher's impact*
- *Numbers of elementary school teaching jobs, with prospects for the future*
- *Changes in the nature of the job*
- *Teacher education and licensing*
- *Teacher pay*

Everyone remembers his kindergarten teacher, the person – most often a woman – who presided over his first uncertain steps outside the home: someone older and imposing, kind or domineering or thoughtful, but, in whatever form she took, a unique and unforgettable presence, and a symbol of the scary, then accepting, then not-so-scary outer world. We are less likely to remember our first insurance agent or our first barber, or to treasure their memories. Elementary school teachers, along with kindergarten teachers, retain for most of us an out-sized importance that has made the work a magnet for new recruits into the profession in spite of its occasional drawbacks.

More than a million strong

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that more than a million and a half Americans made their livings as elementary school teachers in 2008, and predicted steady but unspectacular growth in the profession over the next seven years. The Bureau recently forecasted a net increase, by 2016, of 209,000 jobs. The outlook for teachers has worsened in some states since then as the recent recession has put concerted fiscal pressure on the states, causing budgetary shortfalls that have sometimes led to job cuts and dismissals. California alone is thought to have shed about 30,000 teaching and administrative jobs in 2008 and 2009.

At the same time, demographic trends at work below the radar are heartening for prospective teachers’ longer-term prospects, since large numbers of baby boomers are slated to retire from the profession over the next decade, and will have to be replaced by younger colleagues.

More than in the past, the positions new teachers fill will be cooperative and specialized. For better or worse, schools rely more heavily than ever on adjuncts and on teamwork – on reading specialists, literacy coaches, emotional adjustment counselors and committees made up of all three – to cope with changes in the school-age population and to help the schools adjust to changes in their role. For the time being, the majority of grade school teachers are still generalists who teach an array of subjects, including the Three R's. But they are supplemented now by language teachers, music and art teachers, computer and technology instructors, guidance and mental health advisors and special education teachers.

Educational requirements

For some of these jobs, a bachelor's degree is sufficient. This is more likely the case for private and parochial schools. Public schools are stricter about requirements (but also pay more on average), and in all fifty states, public school teachers are required to be licensed. Licensing requirements are not a major impediment, but most make demands in addition to a bachelor's degree. Most often, these consist of some supervised practice teaching and the completion of a specialized teacher training program (or its equivalent; what's considered equivalent varies, of course). Needless to say, candidates must then pass a licensing test.

Teacher Salaries

American elementary school teachers remain, in general, lower paid than their counterparts with equivalent educational levels in other walks of life. Estimates vary, but some studies have found that teachers make 12-14% less on average than other college graduates (though, thanks to summer vacations, they work 12-14% fewer days). Teacher pay varies from region to region, and in proportion to experience. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the highest median salaries can be found in suburban districts in New York state and California, where pay can range as high as \$75,000 a year, and the lowest in rural areas in Texas and the upper Midwest, where it slips as low as \$42,000. In 2008, the median elementary school salary, nationwide, was \$49,330 -- more than ministers but slightly less than your mail carrier gets paid.

TEACHER TIP

“Be open to making mistakes early, because you will make plenty of them. If you are patient and reflect upon your experiences in a positive way, you will have the ability to become an exemplary educator touching the lives of an enormous amount of children.”

CHAPTER THREE**TEACHER
INSIGHT**

“Many people think that because the school day ends at 3 PM teachers just leave, but, the truth is, we stay late and often put in more than an 8 hour day. Almost always we take work home with us. Yes, we do have summers off but we are constantly thinking about the school year to come and working on our skills.”

Summary of Findings

What’s in this chapter:

- *A collective summary of what teachers reported*
- *Best parts of the profession*
- *Worst parts of the profession*
- *Tips on preparing to become a teacher*
- *Tips on teaching*
- *General insights*

Not in it for the money

Most of the teachers whose stories we include here didn’t see the money as an issue and found rewards in other aspects of the job. Many seemed to see it as a calling – a way of “making a difference.” “It’s not a job to do for the money,” said one teacher bluntly. You have to “have a passion for what you teach.” “I stopped teaching for several years but missed the interactions with students,” wrote another, who took a better paying day job in the interim. “I don’t make more money and I have less time for myself, but I wouldn’t trade any of that. I love meeting new students every year and... I thrive in an atmosphere of change and flexibility.”

Kids are the best

Students emerge as both a blessing and a curse—not a huge surprise, really. What’s more surprising is the degree of unanimity among teachers about the things that keep them going: the thing about their jobs that they like best. Summer vacation? Not even close. For nearly ninety percent, it was the kids – even, on a couple of occasions, for those who said they also didn’t like them all that much. “Do not become a teacher,” wrote one hardened campaigner “because you think it will be easy, or because you ‘like kids.’ It is not easy, and you will not like kids when you are finished.” The thing that he liked the best about his work? “Watching students make discoveries on their own” – the kids, in a word.

Others tried to explain this seeming contradiction. A second grade teacher from the Boston area wrote: “The best part of my job is also the worst part: the children. It is an awesome

responsibility working with small children who can be so easily crushed, but not necessarily so easily motivated. The sum total of their needs is a heavy burden. Yet when one of them really gets something (the ‘ah ha!’ moment), there is not a better feeling in the world. It is too bad it comes infrequently.” This “ah-ha” moment – “watching the light bulbs come on in kids’ eyes when they get it,” as another teacher put it – was of the main reward for a number of teachers, for which “the kids” was simply shorthand. Teachers like teaching... but mostly when it works and when they can see it succeed, and they are just as frustrated as anyone else would be when they see their energies and talents being squandered.

Now for the bad news

The teachers weren’t quite as unanimous about the things they didn’t like. Parents made an appearance. “Teaching is not for the faint of heart,” bluntly advised a teacher from North Carolina. “Parents are becoming more and more belligerent as their kids get lazier.” Administrators, other teachers, the workload, the kids... even standardized testing came in for criticism. “I can’t believe how quickly the focus of education has changed in the 10 years that I have been teaching. It is so test-driven and performance-driven and this goes against EVERYTHING that children need!” one teacher argued.

But the real villain for many of them was the paperwork: not just grading and correcting homework, but writing student assessments, creating independent education plans, and filling out mandated forms. Meetings to discuss and plan curriculum (and other school related issues) were another inescapable irritant and a cause of considerable grumbling, and the two were often lumped together: paperwork and meetings, like heads and tails, a losing coin toss either way. One fourth grade teacher warned “that teachers rarely teach any more” – due in part to all the paperwork –and went on to bemoan “the politics, isolation, pay raises, lack of time, lack of support from government, endless paperwork, things that take me away from teaching, pay cuts at the 11th hour, large class sizes, lack of job security, lack of professional development and support.”

Tips on becoming a teacher

How best to prepare for all this? Teachers were generally in agreement that shadowing a teacher, working as a teacher’s aide, student teaching, and even substitute teaching were the best ways

TEACHER TIP

“Ask questions constantly.

There are no dumb questions ever.”

TEACHER INSIGHT



“It’s a busy busy day; in fact, I always tell my (non-teaching) friends that it’s like planning an eight hour birthday party for thirty kids five days in a row.”

to prepare for the profession and insure you possess the “right stuff.” One science teacher went even further: “I would even suggest that you become a teacher’s assistant for a year before deciding to go into this field. This will give you a real glimpse into teaching. I would also suggest sticking it out for at least four years. After your fourth year of teaching, it gets so much easier. You know how to read the students better, you have learned to tweak lessons.”

Tips on teaching

The teachers’ suggestions were interesting and varied when they talked about the ways to make the teaching go more smoothly, and ranged from the dewy-eyed to the hard-boiled – and occasionally the downright eccentric. Pragmatic suggestions included the following:

- “Use the Internet and make technology your friend.”
- “Create a notebook of ideas that work and don’t work.”
- “Be creative with supplies because money is always an issue in schools.”
- “Take a classroom management course.... Collaborate with other teachers in the school. Learning from experienced teachers can help you tremendously.”
- “It is very important to set up a routine and stick to it! The students at this age crave structure and knowing what is next. It is also very important to tell them what you expect from them and never assume they know not to do something!”

Other suggestions were earnest and memorable but vague. “Teaching is a hard job, if you do it right. And, if you’re not willing to do it right, kids suffer,” wrote a teacher. “You teach students, not subjects!!!” insisted another. Still another, run ragged on the playground at recess but borne along on a swell of tough love: “The army is wrong...THIS is the toughest job you’ll ever love. Don’t go into it if you are not tough, caring and have a lot of love and compassion to spare!”

A number of teachers insisted that a sense of humor was a linchpin of classroom success. “Teaching isn’t for everyone,” one librarian and reading teacher wrote, “but if it’s for you, it’s one of the noblest professions.... [Still,] patience and a pretty

darn good sense of humor are most helpful too!” Many teachers noted that the children were fun and often funny as well. “Kids say the funniest things,” was one typical comment; “so just stop and laugh. You’ll feel much better and your students will see you as a happy person.” A second grade teacher called “the sweet and funny things the kids say” the best part of her job.

CHAPTER *FOUR*

TEACHER INSIGHT



“Do NOT give up after your first year. It is a very strenuous and frustrating time that you just have to get through. It is MUCH better with experience!”

Career Stories: Reports from 25 Working Elementary School Teachers

What’s in this chapter:

- *25 teachers report on their career experiences*
- *Description of and insights into each teacher’s job*
- *Tips for prospective teachers*
- *The best and worst parts of being a teacher*
- *Each teacher’s educational preparation*
- *Additional thoughts on being and becoming a teacher*

This chapter provides the detailed transcripts from our study, each in the original words of the 25 school teachers.



CAREER STORY

Second Grade Classroom Teacher in a Suburban School

Notable Quote: "At various times of each day I must be the coach, the therapist, the enforcer and one of the most important adults in their lives."

Education

BS, Psychology, Suffolk University
M.Ed, Lesley University

Teaching Environment

I work for the school district in a suburb of Boston.

Previous Experience

I worked as a tutor for two years prior to being hired as a long-term substitute and then a permanent substitute.

Job Description and Insights

I am the classroom teacher in a second grade inclusion classroom, receiving assistance from a special needs teacher daily to help with students with educational plans. I am responsible for teaching all the state standards in all the subjects for all my students, who are also sometimes assisted by other specialists like reading teachers, occupational therapists, and the psychologist. A large part of the job is social training of the children, as I am charged to teach the children to become successful participating members of society, and much of this is in character education.

My day runs from tying shoes all the way through assisting the children to deal with the death of a grandparent or pet, and all the steps in between. I live with my



21 students for 9 months, and understand a great deal of what is important to them. I must handle each individual and often each incident on a personal as well as a group level. At various times of each day I must be the coach, the therapist, the enforcer and one of the most important adults in their lives. I also handle their academic lives on an individual basis, as each child may have a different learning style, capacity, and motivation.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my job is also the worst part: the children. It is an awesome responsibility working with small children who can be so easily crushed, but not necessarily so easily motivated. The sum total of their needs is a heavy burden. Yet when one of them really gets something (the "ah ha!" moment), there is not a better feeling in the world. It is too bad it comes infrequently. We have more and more curriculum to teach each year, with little or no assistance; often I feel like it is me against a big indifferent world. I compete with quick bursts of high stimulation (e.g. video games) and must be accountable for the fact that real learning is not like that!

Tips

- 1.) Spend as much time in the classroom as possible before you begin your teaching career. Make sure it appeals to you, choose the age level that seems to "fit", and be sure you love children and academics.
- 2.) Do not accept the current philosophy that teaching is an easy job of "only" six hours a day and 9 months of the year! Do NOT become a teacher for the summer vacation!
- 3.) Do NOT give up after your first year. It is a very strenuous and frustrating time that you just have to get through. It is MUCH better with experience! Try not to give up ANY year, though many may be difficult. Believe in what you do, and try to make it better each time.

Additional Information

It is very difficult but rewarding to take the academic content you wish to teach, filter it down to the age and ability level of each of your students, and then say and model and show it as many different ways as necessary for the students to get it. However, we do it constantly, and successfully!





CAREER STORY

Spanish Teacher at a Parochial School

Notable Quote: "A teacher has to establish clear expectations for her students in order to persuade them to succeed. They should not be forced to guess what you want from them."

Education

BA, Spanish/French, Boston College
MA, Spanish Language and Literature, Boston College

Teaching Environment

A combined elementary and middle school (K-8).

Previous Experience

I worked as a language instructor right out of college, first in Massachusetts and later in Germany with the University of Maryland. I also worked in England as a teacher's aide in a pre-school for handicapped kids.

Job Description and Insights

I now teach Spanish to grades 1-8 in a parochial school. I prepare lessons, administer assessments and teach grammar and culture. I also work on the diocesan foreign language committee. It is very interesting work: developing a curriculum and collaborating with other language professionals.

But I have other more mundane duties too. I serve as a recess monitor, do faculty room upkeep and have to be around for "extra help" sessions at the end of the day. There are fun projects too, now and then, projects that the teachers come up with that are meant to benefit the entire school: spelling bees, geography bees, "It's Academic" or the yearbook.



Best and Worst Parts

I love the children. But the class material is interesting too and I am always learning something. It keeps me in touch with the Spanish-speaking community and allows me to maintain my mastery of the language. Parents are great sources of information and I love learning from them. But the work load is heavy and, with correcting and planning, the after-school hours are surprisingly long.

Tips

Take a classroom management course. Become certified in English as a second language. Collaborate with other teachers in the school. Learning from experienced teachers can help you tremendously. Engage the parents in the learning process. They love the classroom and will lend their support to your efforts.

Additional Information

You need to be patient and caring but firm and outspoken in your objectives. A teacher has to establish clear expectations for her students in order to persuade them to succeed. They should not be forced to guess what you want from them. Still, you need to temper your firmness with a generosity of spirit that your kids will respond to.





CAREER STORY

Elementary School Physical Education (PE) Teacher

Notable Quote: "...there is no other job in the building that allows you to play all day and wear what most people get comfortable in after work every day!"

Education

BA in Human Performance, Sports and Leisure, Metro State College
MA in Education Administration, Grand Canyon University

Teaching Environment

I work for the Denver Public School District in Colorado which provides a free education for all residents.

Previous Experience

I started as a substitute teacher in two school districts, then received my first and current job at the school I completed my student volunteer hours at in college.

Job Description and Insights

As an elementary PE teacher, I am responsible for introducing a variety of activities and games that students can incorporate into a lifetime of physical fitness and activity.

On a typical day I start with meetings or planning time until about a half hour before school when I am responsible for watching the children on the playground who are dropped off before the bell rings. As my teaching day starts, I will see 5-7 classes in a course of a day for 45 minutes at a time. This schedule allows the majority of my day to be spent on essential tasks rather than administrative tasks. Administrative tasks can include professional development, staff meetings or day



to day operations such as lesson plans, lesson research, making copies or arranging for special events, presentations or speakers.

This year I had to incorporate travel time into my schedule as enrollment at our elementary school decreased and enrollment at a nearby middle school increased. This was the first time I had a job share assignment, but it required an extra 30 minutes out of my eight hour day for travel that took essential teaching time away from the students. One of the downfalls of becoming a PE teacher rather than a classroom teacher is that more and more schools are forced to make hard choices with the budget and often times "specials" such as PE, music and art are the first to go. On the other hand, there is no other job in the building that allows you to play all day and wear what most people get comfortable in after work every day!

Best and Worst Parts

The best part about being a Physical Education teacher is that you get to "play" with the kids all day and you get to wear shorts, t-shirts and sweats every day. On days without students you will find that the other teachers are dressing like you and making comments about how nice it must be to wear comfortable clothes all day! The most rewarding part of this job however is that on any given day you may introduce an activity or game that will give a student a skill, passion or love that may last a lifetime.

The worst part of becoming a PE teacher is sometimes the lack of respect you receive from other teachers in the building. Some teachers feel that because the students WANT to come to your classroom, it is easier in terms of discipline and everyday operations. Although it is true that the kids LOVE to come to gym, it still takes a strong teacher with an organized and strict environment to keep the students safe and focused.

Job Tips

1. The first piece of advice I give to any student teacher is to get as much "real life" experience as you can. An excellent teacher makes classroom management look easy and there is only one college course focused on discipline and classroom management, so before you get out there for yourself and fall hard, get that classroom, coaching, camp, daycare or any other kind of experience you can and if you come across some awesome teachers, ask them to mentor you and train you in their classrooms.



2. The next piece of advice I give to all aspiring teachers is to get your substitute license before you student teach because when you complete your hours and there is still a month of school left, your cooperating teacher may ask you to substitute or you may find another opportunity before the new year even begins.

3. The third piece of advice I would give is to keep a book of all the lesson plans you developed in the course of your college career and always explore the internet and PE websites for additional materials so that you have the information in one place when you land that first job or as you spend your time as a substitute.

Additional Information

There is no better job in the world; I would HIGHLY RECOMMEND becoming a PE teacher if you have a passion for fitness or sports!





CAREER STORY

Elementary School Reading Teacher

Notable Quote: "Tip: Substitute teach. You will be a face in the school and not just a number or name."

Education

BS, Education, Bridgewater State College
M.Ed., Simmons College

Teaching Environment

I work for an urban school district in Massachusetts.

Previous Experience

I was a substitute teacher in the Boston public schools for six months.

Job Description and Insights

I teach part time (2 days a week) in two third grade classrooms in Boston. My responsibilities include planning for small group instruction (six students at a time) for two sets of students: students who are struggling and students who are working above grade level. For the students who struggle with reading and writing, one day a week we read a story and I teach the vocabulary used in the story's context. We read the vocabulary words, write the vocabulary words in a journal, give a definition for each vocabulary word and use each vocabulary word in a sentence.

The second day of the week I help the students respond to an open-ended question. These questions usually begin with "Describe..." or "How do you



know..." This also helps to teach them how to respond to open response questions on the MCAS. For the students who are working above grade level, I choose a chapter book to read as a book club. We read each chapter together, and pull out vocabulary words to define before the reading. Then I assign a project or reading response for each chapter. At the end of the book I assign a fun culminating activity.

Best and Worst Parts

The worst part of my job is not enough time with each student. Although I only have six students at a time, I still feel as though I could use more time with each of them, struggling or not.

The best part of my job is that I get to work closely with each student, and I see their progress immediately.

Tips

- 1.) Network. Take workshops or classes offered by the public school system that you hope to teach in, if possible. This will allow you to meet people and possibly get a foot in the door.
- 2.) Substitute teach. You will be a face in the school and not just a number or name.
- 3.) Be flexible.





CAREER STORY

Early Elementary School Science Teacher

Notable Quote: "I would also suggest sticking it out for at least four years. After your fourth year of teaching, it gets so much easier."

Education

BA, Education
BA, History

Teaching Environment

I work for the Wake County, North Carolina school system.

Previous Experience

I taught Kindergarten in Charlotte for two years, then in Wake for four more years. I changed schools and taught first grade for a year and have now Science Lab for the last three.

Job Description and Insights

I am a kindergarten through fifth grade science specialist. I see about six classes each day at 40 minutes each. I work with each grade level, helping teach the science curriculum. The students tend to do more hands-on, experiential science in the lab with me. I help the students use science notebooks and also provide training to the regular classroom teachers on how to do the science notebook.

I have also worked with grade levels on their science curriculum. I meet with them and work on how we can fit the science content into the projects that they do at the end of the quarter. I have also planned science-themed field trips for some grades. I help maintain the school nature trail (which the students often use with me) and organize one or two Saturdays during the year when parents come and



help clean the trail. Along with the nature trail, I work with the second grade on planting a community vegetable garden.

I also coordinate all the science kits that the regular teachers use in their classroom to teach science. This means that I order replacement parts and obtain animals that are needed to teach the kit.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of the job is working with the students helping them discover the natural world: helping a kindergarten group, for example, to recognize a cardinal or a robin by their song.

The worst part of the job is having to track down teachers who have not turned in information or have not completed a task.

Tips

I would advise anyone going into teaching to spend as much time in a classroom beforehand as they can. I would even suggest that you become a teacher's assistant for a year before deciding to go into this field. This will give you a real glimpse into teaching. I would also suggest sticking it out for at least four years. After your fourth year of teaching, it gets so much easier. You know how to read the students better, you have learned to tweak lessons.





CAREER STORY

Fourth Grade Teacher in a Suburban School District

Notable Quote: "I am surprised at how emotional this career is. You become so connected to "your" students, but they are YOURS."

Education

BS, East Carolina University

Teaching Environment

I work for a school district in North Carolina.

Previous Experience

I started as a pre-school teacher and now am a fourth grade teacher.

Job Description and Insights

I am responsible for implementing the North Carolina Standard Course of Study in a classroom of twenty-one fourth graders. I am responsible for their well-being and education on a daily basis. I try to care for the children as if they are my own. In a typical day I teach several subject areas, take children to lunch, play games at recess and try to teach the children how to be good citizens. I also work with my grade level team to develop lessons, plan field trips, evaluate student performance, and support each other.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my job is helping students learn new things and stretch their imaginations.



The hardest parts are the ridiculous assessments of children. It is difficult working with uncaring and negligent parents. It is wonderful helping boost student confidence. It is exciting to see student accomplishments!

Tips

As challenging as things are with state assessments, it pays to look past the assessments and see the children who are being assessed. Children love to learn and love to please and to feel proud. State assessments make teaching seem unrealistic and overwhelming. Teachers have to stay focused on why they wanted to be teachers. 99% of the time it is because they love children and love being around them. The children are worth the stress.

Additional Information

I am surprised at how emotional this career is. You become so connected to "your" students, but they are YOURS. I can't believe how quickly the focus of education has changed in the 10 years that I have been teaching. It is so test-driven and performance-driven and this goes against EVERYTHING that children need! I am hoping that this thorough testing is just a trend and soon someone will realize that this is not the only way to measure what a child knows!!





CAREER STORY

Reading Teacher in an Elementary School

Notable Quote: "Teachers should always be lifelong learners who continue to educate themselves."

Education

BA, Psychology, Middlebury College
MA, Reading, Harvard University

Teaching Environment

I work for a school district in San Francisco.

Previous Experience

I taught 3rd grade for two years, 1st grade for a year and 5th grade for another two.

Job Description and Insights

I work with students in small groups to enhance their reading skills. Every day I work with 1st grade students first on their phonics skills and sight word reading. I make sure they know their letter sounds. Next I work with kindergarten students and teach letter names, sounds and how to blend words. The regular classroom teacher is also working with small groups of students. Next I work with 2nd grade readers and do guided reading in small groups. I also do guided reading with 1st graders in the afternoon.

As a reading specialist I also collaborate with classroom teachers and coordinate testing of various kinds. This year I have been giving the SCOE fluency test to students in small groups as well as the diagnostic reading analysis (or DRA) to



test students reading levels. I also manage a room of leveled books for the school. Teachers come and choose books for their guided reading groups. Guided reading is when teachers preview a book and then students read independently. After they read the students need to discuss the book as a whole group. I enjoy working with 8 classes although it is a lot at times.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of the job is the sweet and funny things the kids say and having a job that is exciting and different every day.

The worst part is dealing with the standardized testing and paperwork from the state. There is a lot of busy-work that teachers have to deal with.

Tips

When you want to become a teacher be sure you have the patience to deal with your age group. Take a lot of classroom management courses. Also be sure to get a teaching credential and continue to take classes as you go. Teachers should always be lifelong learners who continue to educate themselves.





CAREER STORY

Fifth Grade Teacher in a Parochial School

Notable Quote: “Being friendly and welcoming makes a huge difference whether you're dealing with irate parents, or a crying child, or children in an argument.”

Education

BA, History and English, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
M.Ed., Social Studies Education, North Carolina State University

Teaching Environment

I work for a private Catholic school in Durham, North Carolina.

Previous Experience

I have been teaching for ten years.

Job Description and Insights

I teach the fifth grade at my school. The subjects I teach daily include math, vocabulary or spelling, grammar, reading, and writing. Three times a week I teach US history in social studies. Once a week, I teach religion. I also am on morning duty at the school as kids arrive for the day. I run a Junior Historians club that meets once a month.

In addition, I serve on several committees at school: the grant committee, the social studies committee, the home school association committee, a principal search committee, the social committee, and the Catholic Schools Week committee.

Other duties include playground supervision during recess and tutoring as



needed.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my job is working with the students, getting to know them and helping them to learn. There is nothing better than seeing a child's face light up when they finally understand a new concept or have fun reading a novel.

The worst part is managing the huge amount of paperwork. There are papers to grade, papers to complete for students' files, testing paperwork, plus the paperwork to maintain a license and other job-related paperwork.

Tips

Have lots of patience, develop good time management skills, and develop good people skills.

Patience helps when dealing with student situations, parent conferences, and sometimes even when dealing with co-workers.

Time management skills are essential. You need to know how much time to allow for teaching certain skills or units, for managing the paper load, for arranging meetings, as well as to ensure time for yourself and your family.

Being friendly and welcoming makes a huge difference whether you're dealing with irate parents, or a crying child, or children in an argument. Being able to make people feel heard really reassures people and makes them feel that you are interested in what they have to say.

Additional Information

I stopped teaching for several years but missed the interactions with students the most. I don't make more money and I have less time for myself, but I wouldn't trade any of that. I love meeting new students every year and having old students return to visit really reinvigorates me. I thrive in an atmosphere of change and flexibility and would not trade the opportunity to work with kids for anything.





CAREER STORY

First Grade Teacher in a Suburban School

Notable Quote: "It is also important to be aware that college does not prepare you for the pressure of difficult parents, administrators and dealing with sad student situations."

Education

BS, Elementary Education, UMass-Boston
M.Ed., Lesley University

Teaching Environment

I work as a first grade teacher in a suburban school system.

Previous Experience

I worked as a teacher's aide for a year.

Job Description and Insights

I teach twenty-two students in an inclusion classroom. I have students in my class with all different abilities, social maturity and many who speak other languages at home. It is very important to set up a routine and stick to it! The students at this age crave structure and knowing what is next. It is also very important to tell them what you expect from them and never assume they know not to do something! Early in the year you need to assess the students and then deliver the curriculum to meet their needs. It is important to re-assess many times during the year. Also be prepared to talk to parents often and in some cases daily.



Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my job is watching students make progress. They feel so proud of themselves and that is very rewarding to see. Teaching is also different every day! No matter the plan, you also need to be flexible. Kids aren't robots and if they come into school crying you can't just get on with the lesson!

The worst parts of the job are all the paperwork and meetings.

Tips

Always remember that teaching well is very difficult. You teach students, not subjects!!! It is also important to be aware that college does not prepare you for the pressure of difficult parents, administrators and dealing with sad student situations.

You will learn more from student teaching than any course work in college. Classroom management is an important skill. It sets the tone for the day and it needs to be consistent. Be prepared to work hard and not complain! Many new young teachers recently hired are not meshing with veteran staff due to all the complaining they do.

Additional Information

When working with kids you have to enjoy them. If not, you'll be miserable and so will they! You definitely need a sense of humor. Also get your advanced degrees as quickly as you can so you get paid better for more of your career.





CAREER STORY

Fifth Grade Teacher in a Year-Round School

Notable Quote: "Teaching is a secure field of employment and generally has good benefits. But if you're heading into teaching for either of these reasons, I encourage you to find another career. "

Education

BA, English/Education, Berea College
MA, Middle Grades Education, Western Carolina University

Teaching Environment

I teach fifth grade at the only year-round school in the McDowell County, North Carolina school system.

Previous Experience

I went to a college where we had a work-study program. I was a production potter, a docent in the Appalachian Museum, and a tutor in the reading lab, before becoming a teaching associate for the reading lab director. I went directly into teaching after graduation. I have also done summer school teaching and tutored the blind.

Job Description and Insights

I teach twenty-four 10 and 11 year-olds in a public year-round school. My school year starts the week after July 4th, and we run a calendar based on 45-15. This means I teach 180 days like all public schools do, but I teach for 9 weeks (45 days) and we are off for three weeks (15 days).

I start my day officially at 7:45 and can leave at 3:15, but I never do. I teach all subject areas (Reading, Math, Writing, Spelling, Language Arts, Social Studies,



Science, Technology, and Social Skills.) I have one hour of planning every day except Wednesdays, which is the day that I do not have any breaks at all. We are teaching and learning from 7:45 - 11:00, with 30 minutes for lunch, and then 30 minutes of recess. Then more course work from 12:00 - 1:30, with my pullouts (PE, Library, Computers, Guidance) from 1:30 - 2:30.

I use a lot of technology in my classroom, and I am the sponsor of our Letterboxing Club, which currently has 50 members. I am responsible for all lesson planning and assessments of student work and progress, as well as all the paperwork or documentation connected with report cards, progress reports, disciplinary actions, and special needs issues. I am responsible for maintaining communications with parents and within the school environment. I am responsible for ensuring that my students can pass end-of-grade testing.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my job is my students. They are fun and interesting to work with every day.

The worst parts of my job are the paperwork, having to teach to the test instead of what my kids need, and my kids. The kids are becoming more and more lazy as time goes on and that is extremely hard to combat.

Tips

- 1.) Learn some diplomacy skills. Parents are becoming more and more belligerent as time goes on, and interacting with parents, students, and your supervisors requires good people skills.
- 2.) Know your stuff. Know what is required for you to meet your objectives before you start out.
- 3.) Be willing to pick up the slack and shoulder additional responsibilities. In a school climate, things will not work smoothly if everyone doesn't assume duties that need to be filled, without being told to do so.

Additional Information

Teaching is a secure field of employment and generally has good benefits. But if



you're heading into teaching for either of these reasons, I encourage you to find another career.

Teaching is not for the faint of heart. We are looked down upon by people who ought to revere what we do - raise and educate good citizens. You need to have a backbone and to be able to stand up for what you believe in, even when things are tough. Teaching is a hard job, if you do it right. And, if you're not willing to do it right, kids suffer.





CAREER STORY

Art Teacher in an Elementary School

Notable Quote: "Children learn quickly, are quick to compliment, quick to hug, quick to forgive: all things that will make you feel like a celebrity."

Education

BS, Art Education, East Carolina University
MA, Art Education, East Carolina University

Teaching Environment

An elementary school in a rural setting three miles from the nearest town. The school is a Federal Title I school which means that we have a large number of underprivileged students who qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Previous Experience

I planned to be an art teacher from the time I started college. I took off a few years from teaching and worked in a real estate office and opened a boutique sewing shop prior to returning to education.

Job Description and Insights

I teach visual art to 650 elementary kids following the standard course of study in 45 minutes classes, 6-7 classes per day. My schedule (along with the schedules of the physical education, media, computer, and music teachers) is driven by the need for regular classroom teachers to have a 45 minute break every day.

Best and Worst Parts

I love working with children and teaching them new things and seeing them discover their inner creativity and the joy of creating.

The worst part is having to teach so many classes in 45 minute segments. Talking about art and creating art doesn't fit well in short time slots. The students are herded in like cattle. I teach the best that I can in the amount of time that I am given. My philosophy is that quality is more important than quantity.

Tips

Tip 1. Know your subject well.

Tip 2. Be extremely organized.

Tip 3. Promote your program.

Tip 4. Love children.

Tip 5. Stay fit so that you have plenty of energy because you will be on your feet all day.

Tip 6. Be creative with supplies because money is always an issue in schools.

Tip 7. Integrate the natural environment into your art lessons as children are fascinated with nature and its inhabitants.

Tip 8. Remember that all other subjects are inherent in visual art, so you will be teaching the whole child.

Additional Information

Go for it. Teaching is a rewarding career.

Teaching art to elementary school children is a demanding and tiring job, but rewarding in so many ways. Children learn quickly, are quick to compliment, quick to hug, quick to forgive: all things that will make you feel like a celebrity. You need to be kind, understanding, motivated, quick thinking, versatile, creative.

I've worked for myself in my own business and in a real estate office. The pettiness that pervades elementary education is most unpleasant.





CAREER STORY

Fourth Grade Teacher in a Title 1 School

Notable Quote: "It's a tough job, but I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

Education

AA, Brevard College
BA, University of North Carolina at Asheville
Teaching Certificate, Mars Hill College
I am currently working to get my Master's in Elementary Reading and Mathematics.

Teaching Environment

I work for a school district in eastern North Carolina.

Previous Experience

I worked as a fifth grade teacher's assistant, worked in an after school setting, taught a year of pre-school, worked as a second grade teacher's assistant for 2 years while returning to get my teaching certificate, was the director of children's ministry at a church in Asheville, and was a director of an after school program.

Job Description and Insights

I am a fourth grade teacher. I have 20 students and teach all subjects: reading, spelling, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. It is my job to teach the subjects, but to also wear many other hats. I am a mother figure to many of my students, as well as being a nurse, a counselor, a facilitator, a friend, and a companion. Sometimes, I am the only positive aspect in some of my students' lives. I teach in a Title One school, which means that my school is partially funded by the Federal government based on the number of students we have



who receive free and reduced lunch. It is also my job to teach the students how to take tests, to feel confident, to use correct grammar, and to use their manners. It's a tough job, but I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. A typical day begins by greeting my students who straggle in from the time the school bells rings 'til the time the tardy bell rings. After I take up lunch money and check attendance, my students immediately go to specials and I get my planning period. Upon their return, we spend the next two hours in literacy block where I teach reading, writing, grammar, and spelling. Next we go to lunch, then come back and work on mathematical concepts for one and a half hours. When math is over, we have recess for half an hour. After recess, I teach either science or social studies. I teach one four and a half weeks, then I switch to the other one. It's a great system. Last, the students pack up and go home!

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my work is that every day is a new day. There are no dull moments. I can never use the same lesson plans from year to year because the students change every year. I write plans according to the students I have at the time.

The worst part of the job is that there is too much paper work.

Tips

- 1.) Volunteer in classrooms (all levels) as much as you possibly can. Volunteer more than your school requires you to.
- 2.) Get ideas from teachers. Create a notebook of ideas that work and don't work.
- 3.) Ask questions constantly. There are no dumb questions ever. Good teachers will volunteer to help you and encourage you along your path. Good teachers will also encourage you to help yourself to any resources they may have.





CAREER STORY

Fifth Grade Science and Technology Teacher

Notable Quote: "The worst part is all of the paper work and state testing. It's a lot of pressure."

Education

BA, Liberal Studies, California State University at Sacramento
M.Ed., Western Carolina University

Teaching Environment

I work in a rural Title I school in western North Carolina

Previous Experience

In over the past twenty years I've taught the fifth, sixth and eighth grades.

Job Description and Insights

I currently teach fifth grade science. I have 80 students in 3 classes, 3 times a week. I also teach the same 80 students technology in 6 classes a week. My final class is geography: same students, 6 classes a week. These are my teaching duties, which also involve writing lesson plans, grading assignments and planning remediation. We also have faculty meeting and morning duty on different weeks. I also have an environmental club one afternoon each week.

Each year this can change. I might be moved to another grade; I haven't had this happen, but I could or I might leave a team teaching situation and move to a self-contained classroom. That is a classroom where I teach one class, but teach all subjects. I don't mind this, but it's a lot of fun teaching the three subjects I teach!!!



Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my job is working with the kids in areas with which I have a passion. I love teaching science, technology and geography because they all tie into each other.

The worst part is all of the paper work and state testing. It's a lot of pressure. I often don't feel I have enough time to do all the work I need to do. We have a lot of requirements and it leaves little time for just fun stuff, which is also a part of learning!

Tips

Make sure you love what you are doing. It's not a job to do for the money. Have a passion for what you teach! Keep learning, don't ever become happy just doing the same exact thing each year. There are many opportunities to keep informing yourself as you further along your career.

Additional Information

Work in a classroom as a volunteer or as a substitute. Get experience with kids before investing all the time of college and finding out you don't like to be around kids!





CAREER STORY

Disillusioned Public School Teacher

Notable Quote: "Be aware that teachers rarely teach anymore."

Education

BS, Child Development, Michigan State
MA, Special Education, Eastern Michigan University

Teaching Environment

I currently work for the public school system in North Carolina.

Previous Experience

I have worked in education as a teacher in public or charter schools for the past 16 years.

Job Description and Insights

My day begins at 7 with a meeting. I sit there until the bell rings and rush frantically to get in the door before students arrive at 8:45. I keep them busy for 30 minutes before any real teaching can start, then check morning work with students and their homework from the night before. We follow with a reading lesson. I teach reading the prescribed way for the regulated amount of time whether the kids respond or not. Wake County requires lessons to consist of a certain method and last for two hours. I figure out how to teach writing before lunch since there is less than two hours. Lunch.

After lunch, I teach science or a social studies lesson for 45 minutes and try to fit in a literature circle. I run to specials afterwards, try to conference with parents and make phone calls and squeeze in a trip to the bathroom. I pick up kids from specials, teach math, go over concepts from the day; review them and assign



homework, check students' agendas and give them a behavior grade for the day. I also record any notes to parents and missing homework in agendas. At length, I pack up and take students to recess. They get dismissed after recess, a staggered dismissal that takes about 20 minutes of messing around. I work after they leave to try to prepare for tomorrow's meeting.

Best and Worst Parts

The worst part of the job includes the politics, isolation, pay raises, lack of time, lack of support from government, endless paperwork, things that take me away from teaching, pay cuts at the 11th hour, large class sizes, lack of job security, lack of professional development and support, parents who think teaching is all your job and none of their responsibility.

The best part of the job is the teaching itself: preparing lessons, watching the light bulbs come on in kids eyes when they get it.

Tips

- 1.) Be aware that teachers rarely teach anymore.
- 2.) School is very political. Be particular about the county where you teach. Research its expectations and rules before applying.
- 3.) Ask many questions when you interview to see if you fit the expectations of the principal.





CAREER STORY

Teacher in a Public Elementary School

Notable Quote: "Continue to work on your education. It always pays off in the end."

Education

MA, Education

Teaching Environment

I work in a suburb of Boston.

Previous Experience

I worked in a day care center in high school. After graduating from college I spent two years teaching at a private school.

Job Description and Insights

Teaching is more than just standing at the front of the classroom. There are so many aspects to it. I am a mentor, friend, nurse, and disciplinarian. I work with students on assignments. I grade student work. I do recess duty daily, which is always interesting. I cover other classrooms as needed. (This is great experience to see what other grades are learning in their classes.) I also administer state-wide tests to students in small groups.

Teaching is a career where you need to have good communication skills, not just with the students, but also with their parents and guardians, the principal and other teachers. This is sometimes on a personal level or strictly academic. It is such a great reward working with children. There are some days that are harder than others, but overall, teaching is a lot of fun. I was lucky to have a good education that prepared me well for this field, which is what I always knew I



wanted to do. Many people think that because the school day ends at 3 teachers just leave, but, the truth is, we stay late and often put in more than an 8 hour day. Almost always we take work home with us. Yes, we do have summers off but we are constantly thinking about the school year to come and working on our skills. And this can often mean taking classes to better ourselves.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of the job is working with kids. They get so excited over certain things and it's so much fun to watch. It is very fulfilling to go home and know that I made a difference in someone's life.

The worst part of the job is all the paperwork and testing that takes place. It can be overwhelming.

Tips

When starting out don't be afraid to take the lowest-paid job. Don't worry about pay and benefits, just work on building up your resume. No matter what job you take be sure to do your best. Continue to work on your education. It always pays off in the end.





CAREER STORY

Elementary Classroom Teacher

Notable Quote: "You will be challenged in so many ways. You must love it or you just can't do it."

Education

Master of Education

Teaching Environment

I work for a school district in suburban Boston.

Previous Experience

I've always been a classroom teacher.

Job Description and Insights

As a classroom teacher it is my job to guide the children through the curriculum as determined by the state curriculum standards and district policies. I teach all subject areas in a self-contained inclusionary classroom. It is my responsibility to stay current in all curriculum areas. This is accomplished through regular professional development opportunities. The state requires re-licensure based upon successful completion of a certain number of hours of professional development. I carefully prepare daily lessons for the students. All preparation of materials is my responsibility. Formal and informal assessments are administered and scored by me. Daily work is evaluated by me. I am responsible for the creation and maintenance of a safe, attractive, and educationally sound classroom environment. I maintain accurate academic records for each student and report progress to parents through the report card and parent teacher conference process. I maintain records for the students' cumulative record file in



accordance with district requirements. I am responsible for my students' academic, physical, and emotional needs during the school day. I provide home assignments for children to complete in order for parents to stay apprised of their child's academic requirements.

I tie sneakers, zip coats, wipe tears, and plan classroom celebrations. I listen to struggling readers and guide beginning writers. I help children understand that there is a big difference between 14 and 41. I read stories and laugh a lot. I sometimes cry. I know more ways to spell Megan than anyone would think possible. I cut out shapes and characters and try to make sense of some pretty crazy stories. I teach children how to make puppet shows and poems. I plant 20 cups of bean seeds and sneak in many extras just to make sure everyone gets a bean plant. I find something special in every parent's child and make sure they know it. I settle conflicts and hopefully make a difference in the life of at least one child.

Best and Worst Parts

The children and families are the best parts of the job. My colleagues are dedicated, hard working and a constant source of inspiration.

The worst parts of the job are the constant, unrelenting demands of paper work. The current view of "one size fits all" education leaves little room for children's individual development.

Tips

Don't listen to anyone's advice. If you want to teach, it is something that is a calling. There is no financial benefit. The much-lauded vacations are devoted to catching up on paper work and pursuing professional development. You will be challenged in so many ways. You must love it or you just can't do it.





CAREER STORY

Physical Education Teacher in an Elementary School

Notable Quote: "If you are patient and reflect upon your experiences in a positive way, you will have the ability to become an exemplary educator touching the lives of an enormous amount of children."

Education

BA, Science, Springfield College
MA, School Administration, American International College (currently attending)

Teaching Environment

I work for a school district in suburban Boston.

Previous Experience

I worked as a summer program counselor planning and instructing physical activities and games for children. I was promoted to assistant director helping to oversee the entire program including arts/crafts, swimming lessons, physical activities and games.

Job Description and Insights

As a physical education and health teacher, my main responsibility is to educate children about physical, mental, and social health and encourage children to participate in lifelong activities that promote all three.

A typical day on the job includes lesson preparation in the morning followed by three second/third grade classes. I then take some time to eat lunch and do more lesson preparation. Next I have lunch or recess duty where I help supervise the children in the cafeteria or on the playground. I usually have two classes in the afternoon followed by bus duty in the gym one day a week.

After school, I spend some time organizing my thoughts and materials before heading home. Once at home, I spend a good chunk of my free time planning for future lessons and reflecting on previous lessons. To be a good instructor you have to be willing to put the time in even when you are not on the clock being paid to do so.

Best and Worst Parts

The absolute best part of my job is helping build the foundations of America's youth. Seeing a student smile or say how much he loved your lesson is worth more than any dollar amount. Teaching offers a lot of rewards.

The worst part of the job is having to deal with co-workers who are just here to collect their paycheck and do not value the children and the profession as much as I do.

Tips

Be patient and always put the students first when making decisions. Work with integrity and use your best judgment. Have passion for what you do and let it show. Once you have become an educator, spend time expanding your knowledge to keep it current.

Additional Information

If you are planning on becoming a teacher, take your college course work seriously, especially that of your apprenticeship. Experience in the classroom is definitely the best teacher. Be open to making mistakes early, because you will make plenty of them. If you are patient and reflect upon your experiences in a positive way, you will have the ability to become an exemplary educator touching the lives of an enormous amount of children.





CAREER STORY

Elementary School Music Teacher

Notable Quote: "There are days when student behavior is very conducive to productive rehearsals and days when I feel like a policewoman."

Education

Bachelor of Music in Horn Performance, Oberlin Conservatory
Master in Music Education, Boston University

Teaching Environment

I teach elementary school students from kindergarten through fifth grade general music, chorus and music appreciation classes.

Previous Experience

This is my first job, and I have been in it for 12 years.

Job Tasks

Most of my classes are between 20 and 28 children at a time. I teach grades K, 1, 3, 4 and 5 for thirty minutes per week. Another teacher takes care of second grade and some first grade classes, because I elect to work part time (3 days per week). In addition to the regular 12 classes in my schedule, all students in fourth and fifth grades are required to be in chorus, which meets for 45 minutes (fourth) or one hour (fifth). For chorus classes, I have a paid accompanist who plays the piano for us, and I also have at least one classroom assistant helping with classroom management. The reason for this extra support is that I have 60 or more children at a time in these rehearsals, and it is impossible for me to notice every little issue that might develop between children and get musical work done with the group. These assistants are indispensable.

Chorus rehearsals are performance-based, and culminate in two or three concerts per year. This year, my fourth graders had a concert in January and will perform again in June. The fifth graders performed a mini-concert in November, then did intensive work on a musical in February, and will have their last concert in June.

Other classes are not performance based, except for third grade recorder students, who share their musical work with parents and teachers in June. My primary lessons (grades K-2) often include many consecutive activities which require different skills from the children: sitting and listening, getting up and moving, listening and describing what they hear, playing percussion instruments, reading musical notation. The pace of my lessons is quite fast and commensurate with the attention span of the young child.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my job is clearly the "aha" moments, when students demonstrate their understanding of what I have been trying to teach them. Example: this morning my first graders were able to sight read, in tune, a song from solfege notation, without any aural prompting from me.

The most difficult parts of my job include motivating students who think they do not like music, and keeping large-group chorus rehearsals free of social interactions. There are days when student behavior is very conducive to productive rehearsals and days when I feel like a policewoman.

Job Tips

1. Before trying anything else, get solid ideas about classroom management. Ask other teachers the type of negative behaviors they have experienced, and how they structure their classroom environments to make these less likely.
2. Next, understand that there will be a second year: many first year teachers have so much to learn about classroom management that they become discouraged and feel as if their good teaching ideas don't work. They will, as soon as the children have been shown how to CARE. This is more important than anything else.



Additional Information

I am surprised how much it matters that music teachers have the support of the school principal and classroom teachers. There are several times throughout the year when teachers need to give and take teaching time from each other, and a positive relationship really helps this. I have a very supportive principal who understands that high quality musical performances take time (rehearsal time). I cannot imagine running my program without this.





CAREER STORY

Elementary School Outdoor Science and Ecology Instructor

Notable Quote: “You can’t do everything you want to do. Stick with quality over quantity, and do a few things well, rather than trying to do too much.”

Education

BA, Psychology, North Carolina State University
K-6 Teaching Certification, Meredith College
Reading Recovery Graduate Courses, East Carolina University
I am currently working on my MS in Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences, North Carolina State University.

Teaching Environment

I work for the Johnston County (North Carolina) school system.

Previous Experience

I taught literacy, first grade, kindergarten, and outdoor science for seven years, then became an outreach education specialist at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences for four years. I am now back at two schools teaching literacy and outdoor science.

Job Description and Insights

I work at two schools in my county teaching literacy and outdoor science to pre-K through 5th grade students.

Three days a week, I go to one school where, throughout the month, I work with



third through fifth graders, taking a class at a time outside to teach them experiential, hands-on science activities. We focus on natural science activities centered around wildlife, plants, insects and spiders, butterfly gardening, trees, ecology, bird observation, and creek and pond life.

The rest of the time at that school, and the other two days at the other school, I teach approximately 8 small literacy groups per day. These groups consist of approximately five or six struggling readers for about half an hour per group. At one school I am working with 2nd, 3rd, and 5th graders (for the fifth graders I am incorporating social studies as well), and at the other school I am working with kindergarten, first, and second graders.

I also help coordinate parent and staff workshops for literacy and science, and coordinate with the school beautification committee for school beautification days.

At each school, I sponsor the Green Kids Environmental Science Club, which meets every couple of weeks to do outdoor science and eco-friendly activities.

Best and Worst Parts

The best parts of the job are seeing the marked growth and improvement in the students from what you've taught them, and the love and appreciation from students, staff, and parents when you've done your best job with them.

The worst parts of the job are always feeling like you're just barely keeping your head above water and feeling like there is so much more you could be teaching the students and doing with them, if you weren't spread so thin.

Tips

- 1.) Don't sweat the small stuff. You can't do everything you want to do. Stick with quality over quantity, and do a few things well, rather than trying to do too much. I need to take my own advice on this one.
- 2.) Don't let one bad day/bad attitude/unkind word cloud the big picture. You won't always reach everyone. Rejoice in the little victories of the students you do reach.
- 3.) Be happy and make the most of the situation in which you find yourself. The grass is not always greener on the other side.





CAREER STORY

First- and Second- Grade Reading Teacher

Notable Quote: “There are really great parents, of course, and they’ll support you in anything you do. But there are always one or two who will make you want to turn your back on teaching forever.”

Education

AGS, General Studies
BS, Education
MA, Education

Teaching Environment

I work for a school system in Virginia.

Previous Experience

I baby-sat, worked at day-care centers and worked as a substitute teacher

Job Description and Insights

I am a first- and second-grade language arts and social studies teacher.

I start my morning off with twenty-seven first graders. We begin by meeting on the carpet, where we check our calendar and see what is on our agenda. Then we talk about the days of the week and count the number of days we've been in school. We follow up by reading the morning message. Buried in the message are a host of mistakes that the children have to find and that they love tracking down. After the message, we read the question of the day and discuss our answers. Then it's time to read a book. I pick a book I know the kids will like, normally one that helps me teach them something too. After this, I explain how the rest of the day will go and what the work is they'll be doing. Then we split up into groups



where we work on different reading skills. The groups are different every day.

Before I know it, it is time to switch. Then I move on to second grade and do something entirely different!

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of my job is the kids. Most of them are great! They are honest and many of them are lovely.

The worst part of my job is dealing with the school's administration and with parents. They can make or break my year. There are really great parents, of course, and they'll support you in anything you do. But there are always one or two who will make you want to turn your back on teaching forever. An administrator who supports you makes your job far easier, but when you have one who doesn't...

Job Tips

Know that teaching kids this age isn't as easy as it looks. You need to be very organized and you will have to use your personal time and money to make ends meet! But the rewards are great.

Additional Information

You have to be a caring person.





CAREER STORY

Elementary School Teacher

Notable Quote: "The main focus, of course, is the students. Not just their academic education, but the day-to-day emotional support has become an ever growing part of the responsibility of teaching."

Education

B.S. Indiana University
M.S. Wright State University

Previous Experience

I taught Sunday school.

Job Description and Insights:

A teacher's job includes many and varied duties. There is always paperwork and that obligation is becoming even more detailed. The main focus, of course, is the students. Not just their academic education, but the day-to-day emotional support has become an ever growing part of the responsibility of teaching. Teaching is evolving into educating the whole child much more so than it used to be.

Every day is different in teaching. That is where it is essential to be flexible. There is no standard day. Every day must be looked at as a new adventure because anything can (and does) happen.

Most students do want to learn what it is that the teacher is trying to present to them. However, there are always one or two whose intention it is to appear bored or absolutely not interested in anything that the teacher presents. The challenge is to try to motivate these particular students to some level of interest while maintaining the interests of the entire class.



Teachers must be prepared for the daily tasks (i.e. have anything that the students might need ready). Also a teacher has to be knowledgeable in their field of presentation (not just the subject they happen to be teaching). Keeping current on developments is essential to being able to sufficiently educate students.

In today's world of education parents play a much greater role. Whereas twenty years ago parents allowed and believed that the school was in charge of the education of the students, today the parents believe that they know and understand better how to educate the students. They do not hesitate to let the schools know their feelings.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of teaching is the rapport with the students. Hearing from students years later with comments about how you impacted their lives makes everything worthwhile.

The worst part of the job is dealing with parents who truly think that they know best about how to grade work and how to present material to the class.

Tips

Teaching is usually something that must be instinctive. As much as it is important to keep current on the many roles of a teacher, the basic tenet is to want to teach. It is the big divider between doing a good job and not. No good teacher looks at teaching as a job.

Additional Information

Teaching has become a changing career. It is difficult to understand the myriad of tasks that are now expected of every teacher. It is also the most rewarding of occupations.





CAREER STORY

Third Grade Teacher in a Rural School District

Notable Quote: "I try to involve [parents] in the process as much as I can. They know their children and are my greatest ally."

Education

BS, Library Science, Elementary Education

Teaching Environment

I work for a school district in rural North Carolina.

Previous Experience

After getting my degree in Library Science, I began a family. I became a day care director to be with my children and still work. When my children were all school age, I worked with schools for a book fair company, made lots of money, got divorced and moved back home (to a small town) and had to leave the company. I eventually went back to school to get my elementary ed. degree and have loved teaching ever since.

Job Description and Insights

I teach elementary school at a local public school. I am responsible for teaching about twenty third graders. I get to school about thirty to forty-five minutes before the bell rings. I make sure I have the papers and materials ready for the day, check my box for any new information, make sure there are pencils sharpened and that everything is ready for the students to come in.

I prepare the lesson plans according to the state curriculum guidelines, and do my best to integrate the lessons in order to teach all the material in ways the students



are interested in. I make the lessons as diverse and involving as I can, and try to allow the students to make discoveries on their own. I keep abreast of current and new ideas by attending as many workshops as I can without being away from my class too often, and try to stay involved in the community. I tutor students after school when necessary, and keep in touch with the parents as much as possible. I try to involve them in the process as much as I can. They know their children and are my greatest ally. I communicate with my peers and work with them to acquire the best practices from all I can.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of the job is the kids, and the worst part is the kids, too. When you see enlightenment and learning on their faces, and when you are watching them make discoveries on their own, that is the best. When you work with your peers and come up with a lesson that touches a child who has been hard to reach, that is great. When you see children in situations that are not the best, and you are helpless to make it all better, it is the worst.

Tips

Do not become a teacher because you think it will be easy, or because you "like kids." It is not easy, and you will not like kids when you are finished.

Do not become a teacher because the hours are short and you don't have to work all summer. Good teachers spend many more than 40 hours per week teaching, assessing work, and planning. And many summer hours are spent at school getting ready.





CAREER STORY

Childhood Literacy Specialist

Notable Quote: "When you find someone from whom you can learn, follow that person and hopefully they will mentor you. I have seen young people starting out in this field who have great potential but they are working with a mediocre teacher who will not help them grow."

Education

BA, Secondary Education/History and Government, Antioch College
M.Ed, Child Study, Tufts University
Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in Administration & Supervision,
Wheelock College

Teaching Environment

The primary goal of my agency is to be an agent of change to improve school systems' teaching of reading. I work with the early childhood division, where I work with pre-school programs which focus on the foundational skills needed to become a successful reader.

Previous Experience

I began as a Head Start teacher for 2 years, then after my master's degree I was child development specialist at a community mental health center for 12 years. I returned to the same Head Start Program as director for 4 years, then returned to graduate school. At a state agency for childcare I was an administrator working on policy, professional development for child care workers and research issues for 12 years. I was also director of early literacy in an Americorps program for 3 years.



Job Description and Insights

I observe in classrooms (serving 3, 4 and 5 year-olds) and follow that with a meeting with the teacher or teaching team if possible. We discuss ways to improve the classroom, new strategies to work with individual children, and adaptations to the curriculum. Sometimes I model a lesson so the teacher can observe me working with the children. Periodically, I design and present a professional development workshop to teachers or assistants on some aspect of the curriculum or strategy for managing behavior of the children. This requires early childhood education knowledge, experience, research and good presentation skills.

When in the office, I create curriculum materials or tools to assist the classroom teachers in their delivery of the packaged curricula which they are using. Part of my job is to stay current with the research and cutting edge practices in the field. I need to read scholarly articles, reports and books on the topic. Occasionally I find an outstanding article and write a summary of the research and offer suggestions for practical application in the classroom.

My many years of working with young children, their parents and their teachers and caregivers turn out to be my most valuable resource. I draw on these experiences every day when working with teachers.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part is helping teachers figure out a strategy that works for them and the children. Successful teachers can look and act very differently -- but it works for them. I like sharing a strategy that one teacher created with another teacher who uses it successfully. I sometime feel like a bee going from one flower to another pollinating it with good ideas.

I love my time in the classroom and working with preschoolers, at times I am having so much fun, I think to myself "I can't believe that I am getting paid to have so much fun playing."

The worst part is writing reports and documenting my meetings with the teachers.



Tips

Work in a variety of programs, with different age groups. Use every opportunity to observe in a variety of programs. When you find someone from whom you can learn, follow that person and hopefully they will mentor you. I have seen young people starting out in this field who have great potential but they are working with a mediocre teacher who will not help them grow. Some programs will support staff development and learning opportunities, other will not. Make sure you seek employment at those programs where you can learn and grow--even if the salary is slightly lower.

Additional Information

I love the field of early childhood education. There are many avenues to explore: teaching typical and atypical, advantaged and disadvantaged, gifted and challenged children, working with the parents, child advocacy, state and federal policy, supervision, training, and administration. But it always comes back to the children. They are the reason why I do it and they are amazing!





CAREER STORY

Classroom Teacher in a Suburban Elementary School

Notable Quote: “BE CONSISTENT! The kids come to know what they can expect from you and behavior issues lessen.”

Education

BA, Framingham State College
M.Ed., Lesley University

Teaching Environment

I work for a school district in the western suburbs of Boston.

Previous Experience

I worked in business for many years before becoming a teacher. I worked 2 years in a private school, then went to public school.

Job Description and Insights

I teach in a multi-age elementary classroom, where grades 3, 4, and 5 are all represented, and students remain with me for three years. There are 8 teachers in our program and we group the kids for language arts and math based on ability, teach science whole-class, and group grades 3 and 4 together for social studies, teaching fifth graders separately.

I teach all subject areas, with an emphasis on fifth grade language arts and mathematics. On a typical day I teach all subjects to students in a variety of groupings. Activities can vary from direct instruction to whole class demonstrations to independent work time. I am responsible for all disciplinary issues that occur in my classroom, as well as daily parent contact, recess duty, updating my (teacher) web site, etc.

In addition to classroom duties, I provide after-school help as needed, run the student council (along with two other teachers), attend all mandatory curriculum and staff meetings, and work on a committee to improve our district's writing program.

Best and Worst Parts

Working with the kids is obviously the best part of my job. While behavior problems can be one of the worst parts of my job, behavior problems tend to be a minor part of any given day. Planning exciting curriculum and activities for my classes is something I truly enjoy. More mundane tasks include grading, report cards, etc.

Tips

1. **BE CONSISTENT!** The kids come to know what they can expect from you and behavior issues lessen. This is true in terms of class rules, homework expectations, quality of work, etc.
2. Establish positive parent contact as early as possible and maintain it throughout the year.
3. Have high expectations for your students. They will try to meet them, even if it seems like a stretch.

Additional Information

Teaching is an exhausting, but **EXTREMELY REWARDING** career. You are guaranteed at least a few smiles and laughs each day for all of your hard work.





CAREER STORY

Third Grade Teacher at a Public School

Notable Quote: "Your first year always plan extra lessons for the day. You're learning how long things will take and it can be chaotic if you don't have enough plans for the day."

Education

Bachelors in Elementary Education, Texas Tech University
Masters in Counseling, Texas Tech University

Previous Experience

When I was a junior in high school I worked as a teaching assistant during the summer and I become very interested in teaching. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience and the teachers I worked with.

Job Description and Insights

I currently work as a 3rd grade teacher and have 19 students in my classroom. Being a classroom teacher consists of preplanning, organization, and being flexible.

It is very important to plan in advance for the day. I typically write up my lesson plans for the week in advance by either Thursday or Friday. This will give me an opportunity to know and look for any materials such as books, films, overheads, and any activity sheets that will be needed for each lesson. This also gives me the chance to look for more information to make the lesson interesting and to reach the goals for the lesson. I also have an idea for the coming week and as ideas come up I check to see where it might fit in the lesson.

By Friday I start to gather materials, photocopying activity sheets in preparation for the following week. My grade level meets on Mondays to plan math and writing



in which it is helpful if we are around the same place. Parents sometimes question why some students are doing this and their child isn't. We get to share ideas and bounce ideas off of each other. We typically meet on Mondays but talk throughout the week during lunch, before school and after school about lessons.

I typically check after school each day to make sure I have all of my materials ready for the next day. I try not to be searching and hunting for materials the same day, but on occasion it does happen before the morning bell or during my preparation time (students are in music, art, library or PE). It's not a good idea to search for materials when your students are there because you're wasting their time and they get off track.

It's also important to be flexible because even though your plans are set sometimes unexpected things come up and the plans for the day have to be moved to the next day. For example, we may have a program, fire drill, weather related delayed school, or you didn't finish the lesson the day before because the students were interested in the topic and couldn't move on. That is why I prefer to write my lesson plans weekly so that I can plan according to where we ended the week before.

After all that planning you finally get to teach the students. I make notes about the lessons if something went well or how I need to change it if needed for the following year.

At the end of the day I bring home a bag with things I need to do before the next day. I read my lesson for math, phonics, writing, and read and write up questions for reading groups. Then I'm ready for the next day.

Best and Worst Parts

The best part of teaching is seeing how the students progress and make leaps and bounds throughout the year. There are some days I feel great about my day and there are days that I know I need to make changes in the lesson or in the way I present materials. I enjoy the students and the parents. I also feel like I'm always learning when teaching new lessons. Teaching is very rewarding.

Things I wish I could change about teaching would be having a designated person at school who would photocopy or laminate for us. I spend a lot of time after school photocopying and also use up my preparation time photocopying. I also wish I didn't have some much work to do at home. Teaching is not an 8-3 job. I tend to have two hours of additional work in the evenings and usually spend



Sunday evenings preparing for lessons on Monday. I do enjoy my summer vacation, but I've worked enough hours throughout the year.

Job Tips

1. Please know that you will spend a lot of time in and out of school working on school related work. You will look forward to your vacations.
2. Please know that the first year will be the hardest but it will get better after that and easier to a point. Don't become discouraged after the first year.
3. A teacher needs to have a specific discipline plan from day one. Be consistent, consistent, consistent with the plan. My suggestion is to really work on a discipline plan your first year and change it as needed to get the most out of each day from then on. CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE is essential and can make a teacher's life miserable if you do not have a plan in place in your classroom.
4. Your first year always plan extra lessons for the day. You're learning how long things will take and it can be chaotic if you don't have enough plans for the day.
5. Do not assume anything in class, it's better to teach the material again (as a review from the year before) than the students not know the material and your trying to add to their knowledge yet they can't remember.

Additional Thoughts

I love teaching and have found that I enjoy it so much more now as a teacher of 20 years than when I first started. It's very rewarding but education has gone through a lot of changes and will always change. Just don't forget you are there for your students.



CHAPTER *FIVE*

TEACHER INSIGHT



“The Army is wrong.

THIS is the toughest job

you’ll ever love!”

More Information on School Teaching

In addition to the 25 representative Career Stories found in this book, there are **many more stories written by elementary school teachers** on CityTownInfo.com. There, you can also find career stories on other education-related professions such as **special ed teachers, middle school teachers, high school teachers, counselors, administrators** and **librarians**. Visit CityTownInfo’s **elementary school teaching career page** for teaching salaries, best-paying cities, an introductory video, related careers, and a school search. *All information on CityTownInfo can be viewed free of charge.*

CityTownInfo offers many other career and education-related resources that can be accessed from the site’s **Career and College Search Center** and from its **Career Descriptions** section.

How we gather Career Stories

Career Stories are collected primarily through fundraiser programs that benefit parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) of private and public schools. PTOs request their schools’ supporters complete an online interview and in exchange CityTownInfo contributes donations to the schools. Other non-profit institutions, including church groups and athletic clubs, also participate in our fundraising program. While elementary school teachers are strongly represented in the results, we have collected **Career Stories** from thousands of people working in more than 200 different occupations, from accountants to zoologists.

About CityTownInfo.com

Launched in 2005, CityTownInfo.com helps students, adult learners and career changers choose careers, colleges, and communities. In addition to an extensive collection of real-world Career Stories on more than 200 occupations, the site provides comparative college profiles, unique college selection tools, daily news articles on career and education topics, and thousands of articles on careers, colleges, and cities and towns. As of this publication, CityTownInfo welcomes about ten million visits per year. CityTownInfo is owned by Moving Traffic, Inc, a Massachusetts-based company. For additional information or to make a comment about this book, please contact CityTownInfo at citytowninfo@citytowninfo.com.